

Spain's Democracy Talks to Canada: Pamphlets and Tours During the Spanish Civil War

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In the 1936 pamphlet *Spain's Democracy Talks To Canada*, North American leftist activists A.A. MacLeod and Harry Ward interview delegates of the Spanish Republican government with the aim of explaining the Spanish Civil War from the Republican perspective. The dialogue that occurs, however, speaks as much to the nature of Canadian politics as that of the Spanish conflict. Catholicism, Fascism and the communist or “red” threat were controversial issues in Canada during the Great Depression, and when the Spanish delegates toured through North America, they were met with protests and media backlash. This pamphlet is just one piece of the propaganda produced by the Spanish Republican government and countless international organizations to win support for the Spanish cause. In Canada, this propaganda often took the form of speaking tours like those of the Spanish delegates and the celebrated doctor Norman Bethune.

The interview took place at a 1936 event in Brussels, what the pamphlet calls the World Peace Congress.¹ The Canadian League Against War and Fascism produced this pamphlet in collaboration with the American wing of the League (it was published in the United States with the title *Spain's Democracy Talks to America*). Ward and MacLeod were chairmen of the American and Canadian Leagues, respectively. MacLeod had a long and varied career: he worked as a steelworker, fought in World War I, and served in the Ontario Legislative Assembly for

¹ A.A. MacLeod's fonds refer to this event as the Collective Security Congress, and in her memoir Dolores Ibárruri identifies it as the Conference for Universal Peace (230).

nine years (“About”).² Through it all, he was a fierce advocate for human rights and actively supported Spanish democracy. MacLeod established the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (CASD) and personally met with Spanish President Largo Cabellero to arrange for the Spanish delegates to extend their European tour to North America (Smith 114).

Of all the delegates MacLeod and Ward met in Brussels, Dolores Ibárruri, known as La Pasionaria, made the strongest impression: “Most of all they will remember the warm, deep tones of La Pasionaria, for whom every question was a matter of passionate conviction too firm to admit doubt” (2). Nothing less could be expected from this fierce Spanish revolutionary. “As her revolutionary name suggests, Pasionaria was all about performance,” and through her many poetic actions and spirited speeches, she became a symbolic revolutionary figure (Byron 140). It was La Pasionaria who bid farewell to the International Brigades in a speech that has since become legendary:

You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend.
You are the heroic example of democracy’s solidarity
and universality. We shall not forget you, and when the
olive tree of peace puts forth its leaves again, mingled
with the laurels of the Spanish Republic’s victory –
come back! (Brome 266)³

La Pasionaria was one of the most fascinating characters to come out of the Spanish Civil War, and the Spanish government made no

² MacLeod was the Labour-Progressive member for the Toronto Bellwoods riding (“About”).

³ For Canadian volunteers, La Pasionaria’s words surely rang true. Many revisited Spain in the decades after the war, and they were welcomed back graciously by their former comrades. For moving stories of Canadian volunteers returning to Spain, see the final chapter of Michael Petrou’s *Renegades*.

mistake in sending her abroad to garner support. She bolstered morale through regular broadcasts to the Spanish people and was a powerful ambassador for Spain during her tours of Europe.

La Pasionaria parted ways with her fellow delegates to return to Spain. Of the delegates at Brussels, only two—Marcelino Domingo and Father Luis Sarasola—visited Canada, along with Spanish diplomat Isabel de Palencia (Peck 33). The tour included half a dozen Canadian cities, and each city received the delegates in its own unique way. Winnipeg’s warm greeting was reflective of the city’s culture; it was home to many active ethnic labour groups and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, one of the few Canadian newspapers to support the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War (Peck 31).

The delegates met with a great deal of hostility in Montreal, where Fascism, anti-Semitism and anti-communist sentiment were at an all-time high. Throughout the thirties, Adrien Arcand, the “Canadian Führer,” spread his fascist views through newspapers like *Le Patriote* and his National Unity Party (Betcherman 36). The Catholic Church also exerted a great deal of influence, which shaped the way French-Canadians understood the Spanish conflict. As most of the Spanish clergy sided with the insurgents, newspapers carried “daily stories about [Republican] attacks on churches, on priests and nuns” (MacLeod 6). These shocking (and often exaggerated) stories appeared regularly in French-Canadian newspapers (Peck 15), where they distressed faithful Catholic-Canadians. The anxiety and anger over religious persecution is evident in the pamphlet, where the delegates attempt to contextualize and justify the anti-clerical violence to win over a wider, largely Catholic, audience.

Days before the delegates arrived in Montreal, the Roman Catholic diocese of Montreal denounced Father Sarasola for siding with the Republican forces. This powerful statement was widely circulated by the French-language media. By the day of the lecture (23 October 1936), tensions had risen. A large protest outside City Hall incited the council to bar the doors of the Mount Royal Arena where the delegates were scheduled to speak. But that was not enough to restore peace: “By 8 pm a hostile crowd of 2 500 had gathered at the arena. Many were armed with canes and sticks, some were singing, and others shouted anti-communist slogans” (Stewart 144).⁴ The mob soon learned that the meeting had been relocated to the Mount Royal Hotel. The hotel, warned of the approaching mob, ordered host F.R. Scott to end the meeting early. He ignored them and the event carried on, but it ended abruptly when staff cut the hotel’s electricity. The Spanish delegates had to be smuggled out of the building to safety (Stewart 144-5).

The angry rioting in Montreal upset Dr Norman Bethune, who viewed the evening as a lost opportunity for fundraising (Stewart 145). The newly formed CASD had used the delegates’ visit to Toronto to raise a great deal of money for the Spanish cause, but also to announce Bethune’s departure for Spain, where he would work as a medical volunteer. Dorothy Livesay writes, “That decision of Norman Bethune’s—to go to Spain, to throw in his lot with the Republican loyalist forces—had a more profound impact on the Canadian people than merely the rallying of 1200 volunteers” (12). Bethune was the most potent source of

⁴ The crowd, comprised mostly of students, was encouraged to storm the arena by Dr Gabriel Lambert, an associate of fascist leader Arcand. Soon after, Lambert faced charges of inciting and encouraging “an unlawful assembly to commit riot,” which he defended in a high-profile court case (Robin 145-6).

propaganda Spain could hope for in Canada. Bethune was already a celebrated doctor when he left for Spain, and well connected to the Canadian arts community who would soon take up the Spanish Civil War in its poetry and visual art.⁵ When he returned to Canada, he spoke to a crowd of nine thousand in Montreal's Mount Royal Arena, the same venue he and the Spanish delegates had been barred from only eight months before (Hannant 167).⁶

Montreal was the first stop on Bethune's North American tour, organized by the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Bethune spoke alongside screenings of *Heart of Spain*, a documentary about the front line blood transfusion clinics that he pioneered (Hannant 166). Like La Pasionaria, Bethune was a spirited and memorable orator who spoke from lived experience of the devastation in Spain. These energetic lectures surely contributed to his heroic status in the eyes of many Canadians. Bethune shared his experiences with a huge audience, as the tour often included several lectures a day. But the relentless schedule took its toll on the already overworked Bethune and he grew tired of self-restraint. His speeches became more controversial; just like the Spanish delegates in Montreal, his lectures confronted the political and economic tensions of pre-war Canada. Bethune began to speak out in support of communism. He brazenly reminded Canadians that Fascism and war were not foreign issues, and he

⁵ Bethune's own Spanish Civil War poem, "Red Moon," was published in 1937 *Canadian Forum*, where many other poems were published. Many other poems inspired by the conflict were published in the leftist periodicals *Daily Clarion* and *New Frontier*. In its special issue on Spain, *New Frontier* published an article by the Spanish delegate Father Luis Sarasola entitled "Why Catholics Should Support the Spanish Government."

⁶ It is important to note that Bethune lived and worked in Montreal before his trip to Spain, which certainly contributed to his large audience. His charity work within the community and his reputation as one of the world's foremost thoracic surgeons certainly distinguished him from the unfamiliar and misunderstood Spanish delegates.

held the Canadian government, the Red Cross, and many other institutions accountable for their roles in enabling the Spanish insurgents and the spread of Fascism (Hannant 168-9). Bethune reminded Canadians that they too were implicated in this escalating world conflict.

The Spanish delegates also highlighted the global nature of the Spanish conflict. To them, this was not a ‘civil war.’ In the words of Marcelino Domingo, “Spain is the first trench of a battlefield which extends across national frontiers into all democratic lands” (Ward and MacLeod 10). *La Pasionaria* continued, “Today is our turn. Tomorrow it will be yours. We are defending the cause of freedom everywhere” (10). Her words may sound melodramatic, but they were ultimately correct. As the Montreal riot attests, Fascism was thriving in Canada, and every day brought Canada, Great Britain and France closer to war with Germany.

Many Canadians were moved by the Spanish conflict, and Bethune’s tour collected a great deal of money for the Spanish cause. As we see in this pamphlet, the Spanish government was very clear on where this money would go and how it would be spent. Eric Smith argues that the tour of the Spanish delegates “established the active role the Spanish government was to play in propaganda and outreach” (114). Certainly, *La Pasionaria* answers the question “What can we do to help?” with the precision and detail of someone who has carefully assessed the situation and is prepared to delegate foreign aid (Ward and MacLeod 10). The Spanish government and their supporting organizations also offered a variety of options for supporting the cause. Though weapons and soldiers were badly needed, they also requested clothing, food, and medicine—items that were less controversial but

were valuable all the same. An advertisement in the leftist Canadian periodical *New Frontier* [figure 1] requested money to buy milk for Spanish children, and shamelessly guilted the Canadian reader with a photo of a crying baby. Such fundraising tactics played on the empathy of Canadian citizens, particularly as the Great Depression had made hunger and poverty a harsh reality for many across the country. David Malet argues that this pamphlet opens with “a discussion of the land reform program initiated by the prior government, immediately framing the conflict as a class issue” that would appeal to citizens of working class depression-era North America (141).

Spain's Democracy Talks To Canada is a compelling piece of propaganda. It is a small part of a broad campaign to secure aid for the Spanish democracy, and it also provides insight into the nation and people it hoped to reach. It speaks to a Canadian audience already caught up in ideological conflict and economic crisis. Unfortunately, we know very little about the success of this pamphlet. Was it widely circulated, and to whom? Given the astounding difference between the Spanish delegates' visit to Montreal and Bethune's reception eight months later, what part might pamphlets like these have played in shifting Canadian attitudes? The answers to these questions are buried in archival materials, microfilmed newspapers, and the foggy collective memory of Canadian citizens.

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