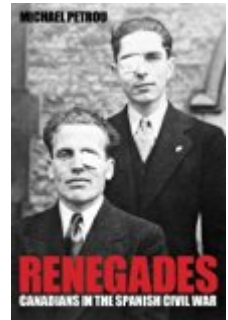


Michael Petrou. *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008. 304 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7748-1418-8.



Reviewed by Ken Reynolds

Published on H-Canada (October, 2008)

Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth (King's University College, UWO)

Historian Michael Petrou's first question--"Why?"--is probably the most relevant to the entire course of this book (p. 3). The "why" refers to the decision of nearly 1,700 Canadians to fight during the Spanish Civil War. As he puts it: "Canadians in the 1930s had little obvious reason to feel as if their own lives and fates were entwined with those of Spaniards. Spain was, after all, far away. Its inhabitants spoke a different language. Few Canadians could trace their origins to Spain or had any relatives there. The two nations might as well have belonged to different worlds" (p. 3). Petrou's examination of this question lies at the core of this very interesting, very human book.

The goal of *Renegades* is quite straightforward--who were the Canadians, why did they volunteer, and what happened to them. The book's layout reflects this; chapters deal with the identity of the Canadian volunteers, the course of their war, discipline, particular stories of three individuals, and the "aftermath" of their experiences. This is not a work of operational military history,

although Petrou does discuss battles and combat quite extensively. This is a book about the Canadian men and women who participated in the Spanish Civil War from someone obviously intent on getting to know them as well as any historian can.

What is clear from Petrou's narrative is that many questions about the people and the events remain, perhaps never to be answered because of a lack of information. This is not from any lack of diligence on Petrou's part, given the amount of research undertaken for this doctoral thesis turned monograph. It simply reflects the difficulty in undertaking research into a subject on which the documentation is scattered and partial, or was just never kept in the first place.

Renegades is the fourth full-length study of the Canadians in the Spanish Civil War, yet Petrou notes that "the Canadians, however, have attracted little attention" (p. 2). I partly disagree with this assessment. After all, four books on a Canadian "contingent" of 1,700 seem to be quite a few. This contingent is a lower total than the number

of soldiers who served in many individual Canadian regiments during either of the world wars or the Korean War, and few of those have rated four books dedicated to their memory.

At the same time, more than four hundred Canadians died during the Spanish Civil War, a fact still not well understood in Canada. I certainly recognize the need to “update” the telling of this part of Canada’s past, particularly since Petrou is able to access material unavailable to the authors of the first three books on the subject. The reach of his sources is impressive and involved research in archives in Canada, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States. In particular, he has made extensive use of recently declassified documents from the International Brigade Collection of the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History in Moscow. My only concern with that material is that Petrou researched microfilms of the documentation, not the originals. As a historian that concerns me, as I would continually ask if there was more I had not seen sitting in the Moscow depository. At the same time, access and expense are two obvious reasons why further investigation may have been difficult. The author also incorporates material from interviews carried out by phone, e-mail, letters, and in person.

Petrou begins with an examination of the Canadians who went to Spain. How many served, who were they, why did they enlist (did they really know why?), why did they stay, and what did they hope to accomplish are some of the questions that Petrou seeks to answer in his study. Not surprising, given the ideological underpinnings of the war, many of the Canadian enlistees were workers and even more of them were Communists. More surprisingly, most of the volunteers were foreign-born (although Canada in the 1930s certainly had a much higher proportion of its population born outside Canada than it does today).

A far more complicated question, as is always the case when studying war, is why they chose to fight. Petrou argues, quite convincingly, that the answer had less to do with a commitment to communism (although it did exist for many), and more to do with a strong sense of antifascism. He writes: “Immigrants wanting revenge for recent European wars and conflicts found common cause with dedicated Communists, a few professionals and intellectuals, and the angry unemployed who felt their lives would be better spent in battle than in relief camps. All shared a common opposition to fascism, in the many ways fascism itself was defined. Spain was ‘simply a chance to put these convictions into action’” (pp. 48-49).

The author spends the next six chapters encapsulating the Canadian portion of the history of the International Brigades, the foreign component of the Republican campaign against the Nationalists. Covering the period from the fall of 1936 when the brigades joined the war, to early 1939 when the Canadians started going home in large numbers, Petrou combines an operational overview with extensive material on individual Canadians. In the course of this overview, he also discusses how Canadians got to Spain, the Canadian government’s decision to ban Canadians from fighting in Spain, the resulting Royal Canadian Mounted Police interest in the Canadian volunteers (life-long, it would appear), relations with the Spanish and other nationalities in the brigades, the development of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, the highs and lows of combat (mostly the lows), the terrible conditions endured by the Republican troops, reinforcements from Canada, prisoners of war, the Republican defeat, the withdrawal of the International Brigades, and the repatriation of the Canadians.

Two thematic chapters follow that concern discipline in the International Brigades, one on crimes and one on punishments (Dostoyevsky anyone?). These are quite interesting and make

intensive use of the Soviet documentary material available to the author. How disciplined were the Canadians in Spain? After all, if most were not Communists, but anti-Fascists and discipline was most often defined politically, as opposed to militarily, the status of the Canadians would have been under constant attention in order to determine their loyalty to the Communist Party. Of course, cases of insubordination and desertion also came into the mix and are detailed by Petrou. The chapter on punishments shows the divergence between what the Canadians thought they were getting into and the political and military reality in Spain. One particularly nasty surprise seems to have been the “disciplinary units,” as Petrou writes, which “served another, unofficial, purpose beyond the fortification work and the ‘re-education’ described by [Vladimir] Copic and [Jean] Barthol. It was risky digging trenches between the lines. The clanking of picks and the scraping of shovels attracted enemy fire, and those sentenced to these units could not be expected to last long. They therefore served as a convenient means to get rid of problem volunteers, though International Brigade commissars tended to describe the labour battalions’ goal as isolating such men rather than killing them” (p. 129).

Part 4 of *Renegades* consists of three chapters detailing the particular experiences of three Canadians who served in the Spanish Civil War—Bill Williamson, William Krehm, and Norman Bethune. This section expounds on many of the events and themes already discussed in the book. At the same time, these chapters serve as complete stories in an of themselves and, in my opinion, are the most interesting part of the book because of the intimate level of detail and the obvious concern exhibited by the author for these men.

Following a discussion of the postwar treatment of the Canadian volunteers, a conclusion, and a postscript, Petrou provides his biographical

appendix. This is the result of extensive investigation—both by Petrou and Myron Momryk—and it offers the names, hometowns, ethnicities, dates of birth, occupations, and “fates” of every Canadian known to have served in the Spanish Civil War. It is, without a doubt, an appropriate way to finish the book.

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Citation: Ken Reynolds. Review of Petrou, Michael. *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

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