

The Canadian Catholic English-Language Press and the Spanish Civil War

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The ultimate irony of the Spanish Civil War is how a conflict of truly domestic origins and character – the climactic encounter between the irreconcilable forces of change and continuity within that society – could so capture the public imagination of the Western world. The War became the *cause célèbre* of Europe and North America in the late 1930's. The explanation for the controversy and emotion it evoked is to be found in the complexion and perception of the struggle as an ideological one and the geo-political realities of Europe at that time. Ideology transcended geographic boundaries and people of various religious and social groupings tended to identify with their Spanish counterparts despite real differences. Placed in the context of a Europe threatened by aggressive Nazism and fascism on the Right and an enigmatic communism on the Left, the War to many took on a new urgency and significance. People chose sides and for the most part came to view it in simplistic black and white terms. Depending on which side, the War was perceived as one of civilization and Christianity against the horrors of atheistic communism or conversely of liberal democracy and morality battling totalitarian fascism.

Of the War's effect on Britain, it has been argued that "probably not since the French Revolution had a foreign event so bitterly divided the British people" creating "the deepest schism in modern British history, something which the passage of time failed to close."¹ As for the United States, "excepting only the Great Depression and the hostilities that began in September, 1939, no public event of the 1930's mattered so much to so many Americans as did the Spanish Civil War."² The War had a particular attraction and fascination for intellectuals,

¹ K.W. Watkins, *Britain Divided, The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Public Opinion* (Westport, 1976), p. vii, 4, 13.

² Allen Guttman, *The Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1962), p. v, 201. This conclusion is buttressed by F.J. Taylor's finding that "the Spanish Civil War was one of this generation's most impassioned and political and religious controversies," *The United States and the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1956), p. v.

writers and artists who gave to it an impassioned moral and literary commitment if not their physical presence, participation, and lives.³

The depth and breadth of the Canadian experience and the War is yet to be determined in a comprehensive manner.⁴ English and French-Canada appeared divided in their sympathies, the former supporting the Loyalists and the latter Franco and the Nationalists.⁵ To one contemporary observer, the intensity of ideological commitment to Franco in Quebec was unequalled anywhere in the Americas except for Brazil.⁶ That this fervour did not translate into overt military support for the Spanish Nationalists⁷ is explained by the even greater hold of isolationism on the French-Canadian public mind that was a legacy of World War I.⁸ In English-Canada, too, the War elicited a fervent and indignant response among many that belied an attitude of isolation and detachment exhibited by the government. Attributable on the Loyalist side to both a fear of the rising tide of fascism in Europe and the legacy of the Depression at home,⁹ this enthusiasm for the cause found expression in the editorial columns of the mass circulation daily papers and Protestant press, in the activities of the Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, and the participation of 1,200 volunteers in the War itself

³ Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Cause: The Intellectuals and the Spanish Civil War*, (New York, 1968), p. 2, 11, 309-10.

⁴ The one attempt to grapple with this subject, Mary Peck's *Red Moon Over Spain* (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1969) lacks sufficient breadth of sources and as a result arrives at some very tenuous and unsubstantiated conclusions.

⁵ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1937: The International Repercussions of the War in Spain (1936-37)* (London, 1938), II, p. 212, 215; also F.R. Scott, *Canada Today: A Study of Her National Interests and National Policy* (Toronto, 1939), p. 17-18.

⁶ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

⁷ Which would be a replication of the Papal Zouaves expedition of 1870 and parallel an Irish response in the War of sending a brigade under General O'Duffy to fight with Franco.

⁸ James Eayrs, "A Low Dishonest Decade—Aspects of Canadian External Policy, 1931-39" in *The Growth of Canadian Policies in External Affairs* edited by Hugh L. Keenleyside (Durham, N.C., 1960) p. 69.

⁹ Victor Hoar, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion: Canadian Participation in the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto, 1969), p. 27. Hoar, perhaps somewhat extravagantly, writes that in supporting the Loyalist "many Canadians may have felt that they were getting a lick in at their own government which had done so little for them in the first half of the decade." p. 30.

fighting for the Republic.¹⁰ To the noted intellectual and legal scholar Frank Scott, the Spanish Civil War engendered “a far deeper sense of tragedy than did World War II.”¹¹

Yet English-Canada was by no means united in its sympathy and support for the Loyalists over the Nationalists in the War. English-Canadian Roman Catholics, appalled by the atrocities perpetrated on their Church and clergy in Spain by the Republic, took up the challenge of insurgency. There ensued a three year campaign of polemics and sensationalism in the English-Canadian Roman Catholic press as it struggled to keep the faithful within the fold on this issue, frustrate pro-Loyalist propaganda activities and convince their fellow non-Catholic Canadians of the righteousness of the Nationalist cause.

CATHOLIC PRESS

Within the orbit of “Catholic life” in Canada, high hopes were entertained for the potential power and influence of the Catholic press. Pius X was quoted to the effect that

in vain will you build churches, give missions, found schools – all your work, all your efforts will be destroyed if you are not able to wield the defensive and offensive weapon of a loyal, a sincere Catholic press.¹²

This press was envisaged to play two key roles in Catholic life as an antidote or “antitoxin” to the pagan and hedonistic secular press that was “at work sowing the seeds of loose thinking, disrespect for authority, immorality... and even unbelief”;¹³ and secondly as a teaching arm of the Church in the areas of faith,

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 1, 38, 100-102. However, to use this fact as Hoar does, particularly that “excepting France, no other country provided so great a number of volunteers in proportion to its population as did Canada” as a crucial indicator of public sentiment in English-Canada is misleading. It appears more a commentary on the efficacy of the Communist Party of Canada in recruiting, especially among left-wing Eastern European immigrants. See Randy Ervin, *Men of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion* (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1972), Chapters 1 and 3.

¹¹ F.R. Scott, “The Nineteen Thirties in the United States and Canada” in *The Great Depression: Essays and Memoirs from Canada and the United States* compiled by Victor Hoar (Toronto, 1969), p. 184.

¹² *New Freeman*, January 11, 1936.

¹³ *Prairie Messenger*, January 29, 1936.

morals and social life.¹⁴ Pius XI, the reigning Pope in the 1930's, was cited to remind English-Canadian Catholics of their "sacred duty to support the Catholic Press and help give it the largest possible circulation among our people."¹⁵ His counsel went unheeded.

During the Spanish Civil War years in Canada the Catholic press publishing in English consisted of ten episcopally controlled diocesan newspapers, two monthly and one bi-monthly periodicals of religious orders and a lay monthly.¹⁶ The combined circulation of the weeklies totalled about 80,000, the periodicals slightly more than 50,000. Only four of the publications had circulations over

¹⁴ See Rev. Henry Keane, "The Catholic Press," *Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, May, 1937, p. 289-90.

¹⁵ *New Freeman*, January 18, 1936.

¹⁶ Name	Place of Publication	Type	Frequency	Circulation
<i>Casket</i>	Antigonish	diocesan newspaper	weekly	5,622
<i>New Freeman</i>	St. John	diocesan newspaper	weekly	4,000
<i>Beacon</i>	Montreal	diocesan newspaper	weekly	5,000
<i>Eikon</i>	Montreal	Redemptorist periodical	monthly	4,500
<i>Canadian Freeman</i>	Kingston	diocesan newspaper	weekly	3,750
<i>Social Forum</i>	Ottawa	lay newspaper	monthly	21,000
<i>The Third Order Bulletin</i>	Ottawa	Franciscan periodical	bi-monthly	750
<i>Catholic Register</i>	Toronto	diocesan newspaper	weekly	16,000
<i>Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart</i>	Toronto	Jesuit periodical	monthly	44,620
<i>Catholic Record</i>	London	diocesan newspaper	weekly	30,000
<i>North-West Review</i>	Winnipeg	diocesan newspaper	weekly	8,250
<i>Prairie Messenger</i>	Muenster	Benedictine newspaper	weekly	1,588
<i>Western Catholic</i>	Edmonton	diocesan newspaper	weekly	3,250
<i>British Columbia Catholic</i>	Vancouver	diocesan newspaper	weekly	4,500

All circulation figures except for the *Social Forum* are from *McKim's Directory of Canadian Publications*, 1938 (Montreal, n.d.). The *Social Forum* claimed a circulation of 21,000, John Sheahan Connolley, *My Spanish Adventure* (Toronto, 1938), advertisement inside back cover. As some figures were not audited, these may be exaggerated.

10,000 while the majority of the remainder were 5,000 or less. This was in a country which had over 1,600,000 non-French-speaking Catholics¹⁷ of whom it was estimated 1,000,000 plus were English-speaking.¹⁸ These meagre overall circulation figures precluded a meaningful national coverage and led to the inescapable conclusion that readership of the English-language Catholic press was limited to the clergy and active lay leadership elite while bypassing the mass of the faithful.¹⁹

Taken collectively, this press was similar in content, theologically and morally conservative in outlook, aggressive in tone, and indelibly Catholic in focus. The *New Freeman* (St. John) and to a lesser extent the *Catholic Record* (London) showed strains of Irish Free State nationalism while the *Prairie Messenger* (Muenster) was preoccupied with affairs German. It offered devotional aids, elucidation of Catholic teachings and canon law and preached progressive labour positions of Catholic Action based on the social encyclicals of Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum*) and Pius XI (*Quadragesimo Anno*). It damned continuously and vigorously what it perceived to be the moral climate of the times – “abortion, birth control, sterilization and now polite murder [euthenasia] which form the quartet of assailants upon the fundamental rights which Almighty God, the Creator, conferred upon man.”²⁰ Free thought, salacious literature and film, immodest dress and divorce were also consigned to the gallery of the condemned. It belittled the pretensions of Protestantism and was ambivalent to the plight of Jews.

International news, rendered exclusively from a Catholic perspective, comprised the major portion of the diocesan papers and most of their front pages. It was presented in the form of reprints from foreign Catholic newspapers and periodicals or in news dispatches from the press department of the American National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC).²¹ This news gathering agency, the

¹⁷ Dominique de Saint Denis, *L'Église Catholique au Canada: Précis historique et statistique* (Montreal, 1956), p. vi, xiv.

¹⁸ *Catholic Register*, February 6, 1936.

¹⁹ Note the *Catholic Record's* advertisement directed at advertisers: “The medium that reaches clergy and religious institutions where decisions are made on the purchase of millions of dollars worth of merchandise annually.” in McKim, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

²⁰ *Catholic Record*, November 14, 1936.

²¹ The NCWC was founded in 1919 as the centralized co-ordinating body for the American hierarchy. It arranged the annual meetings of the episcopacy and carried out policies and directives formulated and issued by them through departments of social action, education, administration, law, press and lay organizations. See Thomas McAvoy, *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Notre Dame, 1969), p. 382, 403. This situation stands in stark contrast to that of Canada where no centralized coordinating or policy-making

largest special-interest news service of its kind in the United States,²² was subscribed to by all the Canadian English-language Catholic papers. The NCWC provided current, comprehensive and partisan news coverage of events of Catholic interest worldwide through its string of correspondents under contract at home and abroad.²³ The consequence of this almost exclusive reliance on the NCWC was a deadening uniformity within the Canadian English-language press as all newspapers published the same dispatches at the same time. It ensured a surfeit of Catholic news about the United States that endowed the press with a ponderous American cast. The pronouncements and actions of the American episcopacy and clergy took clear precedence over their Canadian counterparts. The activities of Rodrigue Cardinal Villeneuve in particular, Archbishop of Quebec and Primate of the Church in Canada, received scant attention seemingly inconsistent with his high office.

The prime factors influencing the treatment of international news were the alleged or real persecution of Catholics and an obsession with Communism. Innumerable articles were published on the oppression of the Church in Mexico and Nazi Germany. These instances of tyranny were overshadowed, however, by a general and intense fear of communism.

To communism, socialism and fascism, the Church in English-Canada was generally hostile. It viewed all three in varying degrees as forms of state absolutism that were incompatible with the traditions of liberty and democracy existing in Canada.²⁴ Yet it observed a unique relationship and made crucial distinctions between them. Fascism was seen as a reaction to the growth of both communism and militant socialism, the first depending for its existence upon the others.

The fact is that Fascism has never arisen anywhere except to meet a revolutionary menace from Communists and Socialists... and if Democracy can keep Communism under control it has nothing to fear from Fascism.²⁵

body existed.

²² Pedro M. Arrambide, *The Reaction of the Protestant and Catholic Churches in the U.S.A. to the Spanish Civil War* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Memphis State University, 1976), p. 10.

²³ The great majority of whom worked for Catholic papers.

²⁴ See for example the speech of Bishop Carroll of Calgary, *Catholic Register*, April 27, 1939. On the Church's attitude to socialism, Gregory Baum, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism: Political Thought in the Thirties and Forties* (Toronto, 1980), Chapters 2 and 3.

²⁵ *Catholic Register*, April 22, 1937.

Even if inapplicable in a Canadian context, Fascism's suitability for other political situations was admitted. "Fascism has done stupendous things for Italy in the war of social improvement" and such a country "that recognizes the rights of the Church... can never be Totalitarian and it will never raise up a generation militaristic in the bad sense of the word."²⁶

Communism, however, had no redeeming features. It was atheistic revolution at its worst, an ideology and system operating in Russia that had severed its ties with the moral traditions of Christianity. It was even a graver menace in Canada, "a plan for armed revolution... and treason. The Communists are the agents of Soviet Russia and under the orders of Moscow. They will commit sabotage in secret until the moment is propitious for an armed revolt."²⁷ It could emerge anywhere and everywhere, and even Catholic residents of isolated, rural and conservative Prince Edward Island were warned that "in spite of its local remoteness Communism really threatens even us... unless the utmost vigilance is exercised."²⁸

CIVIL WAR

Among readers of the English-Canadian Catholic press, the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain in July, 1936 was not totally unexpected. While the average Canadian knew little and cared less about Spain, Catholics at least had some vague appreciation of "Catholic Spain" that had given the world St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila. On more contemporary events, the Catholic press printed the dispatches of the NCWC correspondent in Madrid, the Rev. Manuel Grana, who was also a journalist with the large Spanish Catholic daily, *El Debate*.²⁹ Editorial response, shaped invariably by the content and tenor of the news stories carried, was uncertain and anticipative. Despite the Popular Front's electoral victory in February, 1936 and the accompanying violence, the *Catholic Register* (Toronto) was still sanguine as "Spanish Catholics and Spain in general have recently given sufficient evidence of the splendid qualities to make us very hopeful that the sufferings are only those of growing pains."³⁰

The outbreak of the War and the ensuing outpouring of anticlericalism that saw hundreds of churches destroyed and thousands of priests murdered altered the

²⁶ *Catholic Register*, May 5, 1937 and January 13, 1938.

²⁷ *ibid.*, January 12, 1939.

²⁸ Pastoral letter of Rev. J.A. Sullivan, Bishop of Charlottetown, quoted in *New Freeman*, June 13, 1936.

²⁹ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London, 1977), p. 53.

³⁰ *Catholic Register*, May 7, 1936.

picture completely.³¹ It was this event, this blind senseless onslaught against a defenceless church that permanently shaped the Catholic attitude and reaction to the War. English-Canadian Catholics, schooled in a tradition of one universal church, were unable to comprehend that the Church in Spain was not the Church in Canada. The Church, like any other institution, operated in countries of differing cultural and social patterns and came to adopt and absorb the characteristics and traditions of each. Its universality as an international institution was founded in its dogma. As a national institution, it differed within each nation as nations differed from each other.³² This crucial distinction eluded Catholics in English-Canada who knew only that churches were being burned and religious massacred. Their natural and only response was to opt for the side that offered their Church prerogatives and protection and against those who were the perpetrators of the slaughter. As it was obvious from the Church's teachings over the past twenty years that only communism, "the worst enemy of Catholicism," was capable of such carnage, the War was immediately transformed from what had begun as a traditional military uprising or *pronunciamento* into a religious crusade. This ideological interpretation, "a war between Christian civilization and Red barbarism,"³³ permeates Catholic appraisal of the conflict from start to finish. Papal pronouncements and the issuance of the encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* (On Atheistic Communism) in 1937 fortified them in their reading of the War.

The encyclical specifically addressed the tragic situation in

Our beloved Spain, where the pestilential scourge has not yet had time to beget the whole of its monstrous brood of calamities yet it has none the less roused a frenzy of violence and crime... wherever possible, every church, every religious house, every trace of the Christian civilization has been beaten to the ground... the hatred, the barbarity, the unbridled violence with which this horrible butchery is being carried out are such as to be hardly credible in our age.³⁴

³¹ 6,832 religious is the most recent count of the murdered – 12 bishops, 283 nuns, 4,184 priests and 2,365 monks. Thomas, *op.cit.*, p. 270.

³² José Sanchez, *Reform and Reaction: The Politico/Religious Background to the Spanish Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 1964), p. 215.

³³ *Catholic Register*, September 2, 1937.

³⁴ Pius XI's encyclical letter *Divini Redemptoris* (On Atheistic Communism), *Catholic Record*, April 17, 1937. Also his Castle Gondolfo address to Spanish 'efugees, *Catholic Register*, September 24, 1936 and Spanish Bishops' Pastoral Letter to Hierarchies of the World, *Catholic Record*, September 11, 18, 25 and October 1, 1937.

The paradox of the apparent boundless facility of these “Communists” to rouse the fury of the mobs against the Church in a supposedly “Catholic Spain” was not something readily recognized in the Canadian English-language Catholic press. The possibility that the Catholic Church in Spain by the abdication of its social mission among the masses may have occasioned the treatment it was receiving was difficult enough to acknowledge, much less accept. The majority of publications simply ignored discussing reasons that might explain these attacks or blandly ascribed them to the cunning of the Communists in enraging the proletariat with vicious propaganda.³⁵ The *Catholic Register* could concede that it was “theoretically possible” that there was “something radically wrong with the Church in Spain that has so antagonized the people against it.” However, reports it had received on the tempo of Catholic Social Action and charitable activity of the Spanish Church proved such speculation baseless. Like its counterparts, the *Register* fell back on the explanation of Communist instigation with the further reasoning that the plight of the Church in Spain was fully in keeping with Christ’s prophecy that His Church must endure persecution to prove its legitimacy. Standing the question on its head, the paper claimed the Church was being persecuted “not because it had abused its trust but because it had remained faithful to Christ.” “To a reflective Catholic no more needs be said. The Gospel anticipates everything.”³⁶

ENGLISH CANADA

In carrying their interpretation through to English-Canada, however, the Catholic press faced the hard reality of public sentiment. Of English Canadian public opinion and the War there is little doubt that the Loyalists were overwhelmingly favoured.³⁷ Catholic publications admitted this fact themselves³⁸ but it was not something that surprised them. English-Canadian Catholics had been educated for years to believe that the instrumental factor shaping public opinion was the secular press. This press, “inimical to the Catholic Church,” systematically engaged in

³⁵ *Prairie Messenger*, October 7, 1936.

³⁶ *Catholic Register*, September 10, 1936.

³⁷ *Saturday Night* recognized “the almost complete sympathy in Canada for the Socialist side in the Spanish war, one evidence of the fact that most Canadians were becoming more afraid of fascism and less afraid of communism.” *Saturday Night*, August 1 and 29, 1936, in Margaret Prang, *Some Opinions of Political Radicalism in Canada Between Two World Wars* (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1953), p. 109-10.

³⁸ *Catholic Record*, October 10, 1936 ; *Catholic Register*, February 18, 1937, February 17, 1938.

the total suppression of truth and of facts; the conspiracy of silence...; the colouring of news with shades of thought suited to a definite purpose; the partial admission of truth and the maimed relation of facts; the bold assertions of deliberate falsehoods; the deceptive headlines... these are a few of the various strategies of attack.³⁹

This perception of and antipathy to the role of the secular press in Catholic life goes far in explaining why the centrepiece of the Catholic counter attack was to be the Fourth Estate.

The virtually uniform⁴⁰ editorial response of the English Catholic press to the War was two-pronged: an elaboration of their thesis of a holy war against communism into a full-scale justification of the rebellion and all subsequent action taken by Franco and the Nationalists in the pursuit of victory; and second and concurrently, an attack or refutation of every domestic expression of pro-Loyalist support or sympathy as a product of either ignorance or anti-Catholic bigotry.

In the Catholic version of events in Spain, the revolt was attributed solely to the army. It had acted in the face of incredible provocation and civil chaos. To the Catholic Register, “the uprising was provoked by the murders and church burnings, in which the Reds had indulged from February to July without check from the Popular Front government.”⁴¹ Russia stood accused of fomenting the trouble, of

making a gift to Spain of murder, arson, terror, sacrilege, blasphemy and every other crime incident to a complete breakdown of law and order resulting from an insane hatred of God and religion.⁴²

The Civil War that followed forced people, including the Church, to take up sides for their own self-defence. On the one side were the Loyalists “composed of every sort of scum that has boiled to the top of the witches’ cauldron of Communism.” They were out to impose “the out and out dictatorship of the proletariat, the domination of one class achieved by the revolutionary policy which has produced the most savage attack on organized society known to world

³⁹ George T. Daly, *Catholic Problems in Western Canada* (Toronto; 1921), p. 255-71.

⁴⁰ Except, as far as I can determine, for one editorial in the *Social Forum*, August, 1936.

⁴¹ *Catholic Register*, September 3, 1936.

⁴² *Catholic Record*, October 17, 1936.

history.⁴³ They were responsible for the most unspeakable atrocities, which, however, the Catholic papers still did their best to capture in gory and at times exaggerated headlines: “PROOF OF WHOLESAL E BUTCHERY” – “FIENDISH ATROCITIES BY REDS IN SPAIN: SHOOTINGS, CRUCIFIXIONS AND BURNINGS ALIVE” – “BARCELONA HORRORS: RED WOMEN KILL NUNS WITH AWLS AND LONG NEEDLES” – “OVER 15,000, PRIESTS KILLED IN SPAIN.”⁴⁴ Loyalist territory was “a theatre in which are enacted scenes of bloodshed and sacrilege almost without parallel in the annals of time.”⁴⁵

Opposed to this were the Nationalists “defending the integrity of Spanish territory against foreign domination.”⁴⁶ Their leader, General Franco, was “a man of destiny,” “a God-given leader who has made few mistakes and... has made big and wise plans which he has successfully carried through.”⁴⁷ Military aid from Italy and Germany as a contributing factor to his success was downplayed. Nationalist superiority in armaments was attributed not to these foreign suppliers but to Franco’s uncanny ability to “win them from the Reds.”⁴⁸ German and Italian troops were characterized as “foreign auxiliaries” which he had every right to accept for “what government does not seek allies in war.” Further, they were there solely as a counterpoise to earlier and more massive Russian intervention.⁴⁹ To Franco’s reliance on Moorish troops, Catholic correspondent Catherine de Hueck recorded this reply from a Moor himself:

Franco is our general. We also want a new Spain. We do not want the Holy Musulman faith attacked and abolished as it has been in Russia under the Communists.⁵⁰

On the burning issue of alleged Nationalist atrocities, doubt and denial were the favoured policies. Contrary to assertions that the Franco forces liquidated and looted as a matter of course, John Sheahan Connolley, a Canadian Catholic Evidence Guild worker who had visited rebel-held territory, could report that “the first action of the Nationalists on capturing a town is to bring food and

⁴³ *ibid.*, October 31, 1936, September 24, 1938.

⁴⁴ *Prairie Messenger*, December 12, 1936; *Catholic Register*, August 27, September 24, 1936, February 11, 1937.

⁴⁵ *Prairie Messenger*, November 3, 1937.

⁴⁶ *British Columbia Catholic*, April 2, 1938.

⁴⁷ *Catholic Register*, April 14, 28, 1938.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, May 12, 1938.

⁴⁹ *Catholic Record*, October 17, 1936; *Prairie Messenger*, December 16, 1936, October 13, 1937; *Catholic Register*, July 8, 1937, November 25, 1937.

⁵⁰ Catherine de Hueck, “The Spirit of New Spain,” *The Sign*, October, 1937, p. 54.

medical assistance to the starving, terrorized population.”⁵¹ What occurred at Badajoz was described as a “ fictitious massacre.”⁵² The bombing of Guernica, the Basque capital, “ was framed for propaganda purposes especially to rouse Basque fury against Franco’s forces.” Indeed, the story that the town was destroyed by the Basques’ communist allies before evacuation was believed.⁵³ As for the Nationalist bombing of Barcelona, an event so attested to that it could not be denied, it was justified on military grounds

The city is a harbour for munitions and poison-gas factories, land batteries, oil depots, munitions dumps, war-plane factories and military barracks.⁵⁴

In a feat of logic the *Prairie Messenger* blamed these air attacks on Moscow which if it “ had held its hands off Spain – had minded its own business, Barcelona would never have been bombed.”⁵⁵ The profoundly Catholic Basques were labelled “ misguided,” the disturbing anomaly of their siding with the Republic explained away as “ the logical outgrowth of racial exclusiveness that puts nationalism over religion.”⁵⁶ Nationalist Spain was rhapsodized as a land of harmony and plenty. To the *New Freeman*

Franco’s social legislation should convince all but those of a Red type of their sympathizers, that under his Nationalist government, Spain is destined to become a country of happy homes and consequently a great and prosperous land for social justice will reign and religion will not be relegated to the background.⁵⁷

Such was the rendition of the Spanish Civil War that appeared in the editorial columns of the English-Language Catholic press in Canada. Derived and

⁵¹ *Catholic Register*, October 28, 1937.

⁵² After the capture of this city by the Nationalists the victorious General Yagüe gave orders to march the Republican prisoners to the bull ring where they were shot. About 1,800 were killed. Thomas, *op.cit.*, p. 374; *Catholic Register*, February 17, 1938.

⁵³ *Catholic Register*, May 20, August 26, 1937, February 17, 1938; *Catholic Record*, June 12, July 17, 1937; also Connolley, *op.cit.*, p. 8, 48.

⁵⁴ *Catholic Record*, April 2, 1938.

⁵⁵ *Prairie Messenger*, February 9, 1938.

⁵⁶ *Catholic Record*, June 12, 1937.

⁵⁷ *New Freeman*, April 9, 1938; also de Hueck, “ The Spirit of New Spain,” p. 54-55.

landscaped by the type of news it was receiving and printing – literally thousands of dispatches and articles through the NCWC and a host of foreign Catholic publications – it furnished the factual foundation for the general interpretation of the War as a conflict between the forces of atheistic communism and Christianity. In the Catholic exegesis, it is this theme that dominates from beginning to end. Perhaps Catherine de Hueck summed it up best

It is impossible for a Catholic not to take sides... For today in Spain those two forces are facing each other that sooner or later will join combat in America: Christianity and atheism. There cannot be on this issue a neutral position. It is a crusade – that of Christ against anti-Christ.⁵⁸

DISSENT

From such an emphatic interpretation, public dissent for Catholics was made extremely difficult and is almost non-existent between 1936-39. The one notable if ephemeral exception was the *Social Forum*, a lay Catholic monthly modelled after Dorothy Day's American *Catholic Worker*.⁵⁹ Only recently founded in March, 1936 at Ottawa, it described itself as “a worker's paper – written for workers, read by workers, supported by workers.”⁶⁰ Its purpose was to advocate the social reform of Catholic Action developed in the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI. A lead editorial as its first (and probably last) response to the outbreak of the War and issuing no doubt from its abhorrence of social inequality, harboured grave misgivings as to the virtue of the Nationalist cause

It is so easy to blame those terrible Communists for all the ills that Spain is heir to and to hope that good General Franco may drive them and their fanatical atheism into the middle of the Mediterranean Sea.

When we look at the facts, however, we become hesitant to give the Fascist rebels the Crusader's Cross. The revolt was engineered by a

⁵⁸ De Hueck, “The Spirit of New Spain,” p. 57; see also her autobiography *Fragments of My Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1979), p. 120-26.

⁵⁹ The one American Catholic publication that was continuously critical of Franco's fascist ties and preached an ideological neutrality by invoking the Fifth Commandment to condemn both sides. See John A. Valaik, *American Catholics and the Spanish Civil War* (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Rochester, 1964), p. 82-88, 167-171.

⁶⁰ *Social Forum*, October, 1937.

military clique who were being shorn of their power and privilege. It was financed by the wealthy landowners and industrialists who saw their economic dictatorship threatened... And this combination of caste and wealth, in their determination to secure by arms what they could not defend by ballots, did not hesitate to plunge the whole country into a civil war.

It scornfully attacked the history and role of the Spanish Church

that for forty years... turned a deaf ear to Christ in the Forum. Preferring the security of a state religion under the old regime Spanish Catholics winked at social abuses, abuses that could not be attacked without incurring disfavour of the government and the class that kept it in power. As a result the Church in Spain has become identified with reaction and the worker has turned for leadership to the bitterest enemies of the faith.⁶¹

This initial outburst was not pursued, however, and Spain disappears from the paper almost completely.⁶²

The only other indication of English-Catholic dissent from the official line is to be found in the writings of the Catholic intellectual and minor novelist C.J. Eustace.⁶³ Eustace, a convert from England, co-authored a column "The Undertow" under the pen name "The Fisherman" for the *Catholic Record* and contributed occasional articles to *The Commonwealth*, an American lay Catholic periodical. Eustace's intervention was to defend and echo the interpretation of the

⁶¹ *ibid.*, August, 1936.

⁶² The only collection of the *Social Forum*, held by Father Richard Starkes at Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario, is incomplete. For the Spanish Civil War period, the issues September to December, 1936, February, 1938, and April, 1938 to April, 1939 are lacking. That there was no follow-up to this editorial and that the paper quickly changed its tune can be inferred from a comment in the *Catholic Register*: "The Catholic paper [*Social Forum*] is very young, only a few months old, and it may be presumed that the editor is young and inexperienced and we would surmise that already he realizes the errors of the article." *Catholic Register*, October 1, 1936. It can be conjectured that as the paper was published with the ecclesiastical approval (not authority) of the Ottawa diocese, Archbishop Forbes called in the editor to set him straight on the War.

⁶³ On Eustace, see *The Canadian Who's Who*, Vol. IV, 1948 (Toronto, 1948), p. 300-01. Mr. Eustace confirmed in a telephone conversation that he inspired and wrote the great majority of articles for the column, including all those on the War.

famed Catholic Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain on the significance of the Spanish conflict.⁶⁴ Like Maritain, but in more restrained language, Eustace took issue with labelling the Nationalist cause a holy war. He deplored the too close identification of the Church with the insurgency and feared “that nationalism and patriotism of a racial variety will flavour the new corporate state that Franco is seeking to establish.” He also found no justification for “the reprisals on the part of the Nationalists in the name of religion.”⁶⁵ He took up the defence of Maritain who had become the focus of considerable and embittered criticism in the Catholic world. In an article for *The Commonwealth* he shrewdly attempted to interpret Maritain’s pronouncements of the War in such a way as to bring this acclaimed Catholic intellectual within the parameters of legitimate and acceptable dissent.⁶⁶

Eustace and the *Social Forum*, however, were the extent of public dissidence within English-Canadian Catholic circles to the official version of the War. The problem with the version remained, however: it simply wouldn’t play in the rest of English-Canada.

PUBLIC PRESS

The English-language Catholic press recognized from the first that the overwhelming sentiment of the non-Catholic Canadians was overtly hostile to the Nationalist cause they were championing. What enraged them more were the open expressions of Loyalist support that were making their appearance throughout the country. True to its upbringing, the Catholic press ascribed this situation to the corruption and perversity of the secular and to a lesser extent, the Protestant press in Canada. There ensued a continuous and at times spectacular David and Goliath battle of the press as the small diocesan Catholic weeklies took direct aim at the mass circulation dailies. The obvious purpose was to counteract any influence the reading of the secular press would have in shaping the outlook of the faithful to the War. Secondly, perhaps, it hoped to moderate, if not eliminate pro-Loyalist biases from their news reports and editorial commentary. The match-ups were in four cities: the *Beacon/Star* in Montreal, the *North-West Review/Free Press* in Winnipeg, the *British Columbia Catholic/Province* in Vancouver and the main

⁶⁴ Maritain had a Canadian connection at this time, lecturing annually from 1932 to 1938 at the Institute of Medieval Studies of St. Michael’s College, Toronto. Lawrence K. Shook, *Catholic Post-Secondary Education in English-speaking Canada* (Toronto, 1977), p. 214, 218.

⁶⁵ *Catholic Record*, September 25, 1937.

⁶⁶ C.J. Eustace, “Maritain Looks at Franco,” *The Commonwealth*, February 4, 1938; also *Catholic Record*, August 20, 1938.

event, the *Catholic Register/Star* in Toronto.⁶⁷ This campaign of English language Catholic press reached unparalleled depths of outrage and bitterness. To the *Catholic Record* it was incomprehensible that the Canadian secular press could support the Republic after the atrocities committed on Catholic religious. “The support of that press is at this moment withheld from Christianity and given to atheism and Communism... that have smothered the cause of Christ.”⁶⁸ “In all the history of English-speaking journalism, there has never been a more colossal plot of misinterpretation and misrepresentation than that which has been worked out on the Spanish theme.”⁶⁹ The *New Freeman* pursued this conspiracy line, warning that

the big news of the Spanish Civil War has yet to come and that is who and what is behind the propaganda which fills the daily press of the continent with reports giving in the main, but one side of the picture – that of the Reds.⁷⁰

The mass circulation dailies came in for singular criticism – “the papers which reach the most readers are the rottenest.”⁷¹

This campaign reached its height in the attacks of the *Catholic Register* on the *Toronto Star*. The *Star*, at this time Canada’s largest and most liberal daily newspaper⁷² had been markedly aggressive in its advocacy of the Republic and its condemnation of the Nationalist side which it associated with Fascism. This was reflected as much in the news dispatches it published from its roving European correspondent, Pierre Van Paassen, as in its editorial line.⁷³ At the time, the editor of the *Register* was an English immigrant, Henry Somerville, who had been, until 1933, reporter for the *Star* in London. In that year he accepted an invitation from Neil McNeil, Archbishop of Toronto, to come to Canada to assume the editorship

⁶⁷ It is indicative of public sentiment in English-Canada that the four largest daily newspapers – the *Toronto Star*, the *Montreal Star*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and the *Vancouver Province* were openly sympathetic and admiring of the Republic and outspokenly critical and hostile to Franco and the Nationalists.

⁶⁸ *Catholic Record*, March 13, 1937.

⁶⁹ *ibid*, May 29, 1937.

⁷⁰ *New Freeman*, February 20, 1937.

⁷¹ *Catholic Record*, September 4, 1937.

⁷² Matthew Halton, *Ten Years to Alamein* (Toronto, 1944), p. 41.

⁷³ Ross Harkness, *J. E. Atkinson of the Star* (Toronto, 1963), p. 154.

of the *Register*.⁷⁴ Under his aegis, the *Register* came to be recognized as the flagship paper of the English-language Catholic press in Canada.⁷⁵ It reflected Somerville's abiding commitment to social reform and the rights of labour consistent with the social encyclicals.

Somerville took vehement issue with the accuracy of Van Paassen's news dispatches to the *Star*, accusing him of fabricating Nationalist atrocity stories to arouse pro-Loyalist sentiment in Canada. His indignation was made known in the *Register*'s front-page banner headlines – "TORONTO STAR LIES ABOUT SPAIN," "TORONTO STAR FAKES NEWS."⁷⁶ The *Star* was accused of spreading "the vilest kind of Red propaganda on the Civil War," of engaging in "conscious, deliberate, malicious and loud-mouthed lying."⁷⁷ It was compared to the *Daily Clarion*, the "Soviet Union having two daily papers in Toronto serving its cause."⁷⁸ The *Star* was

doing more to foment the passions that vent themselves in Red Revolution than all the other professed Communist papers and speakers in Canada. The "Toronto Star's" policy is Russia's policy...⁷⁹

Eventually Somerville was able to prove conclusively through Catholic sources in France that Van Paassen's supposedly eye-witness accounts of the War

⁷⁴ J.R.M. Beck, *Henry Somerville and the Development of Catholic Social Thought in Canada* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, McMaster University, 1977), p. 90, 289. Somerville in the 1930's was considered the most influential layman in the English-speaking Catholic Church in Canada. *Ibid.*, p. 434.

⁷⁵ But not the largest in circulation. In fact, its circulation was only about one-half (16,000) that of the London, Ontario *Catholic Record* despite the fact that it served the largest English-Catholic diocese in Canada. The *Catholic Record* was longer-established (1878) and was Canada's largest selling English-language Catholic paper since before the turn of the century. Billing itself "The National Catholic Weekly," it enjoyed a substantial audience well beyond diocesan and even provincial boundaries. See P.F. Cronin, "Early Catholic Journalism in Canada," *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Report*, 1935-36, p. 40. For its dissemination on Prince Edward Island, Sister Ellen Mary Cullen "Growth and Expansion (1891-1929)" in *The Catholic Church in Prince Edward Island, 1720-1979* edited by Michael F. Hennessey (Summerside, 1979), p. 114.

⁷⁶ *Catholic Register*, August 13, 20, 27, 1936 ; October 28, 1937.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, August 13, 1936; October 28, 1937.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, November 17, 1938.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, August 20, 1936.

were plagiarisms taken from the French press and rewritten from the safety of his Paris flat. J.E. Atkinson, the owner of the paper, became so alarmed at Somerville's charges that he travelled personally to Paris to investigate and dismissed Van Paassen on the spot.⁸⁰ This wasn't sufficient to appease Somerville, however, who, to the very end of the War, worked tirelessly to refute what he conceived to be the *Star's* pro-Loyalist propaganda.

In this war of words, Protestants and their organs were not overlooked. Protestantism was something English-Canadian Catholics viewed with a blend of timidity and denigration.⁸¹ Attacks on Canadian Protestants and their press were relatively few and never reached the level of embitterment experienced in the United States. Unlike their American counterparts, Canadian Protestant papers (with exceptions) apparently refused to uncritically embrace the Republican cause in the War and make it a prominent issue.⁸² This reluctance is perhaps attributable to the tradition of "Churchism" or ecclesiasticism in Canada Protestant development that offered greater recognition to institutional prerogatives.⁸³ For ironically enough it was just such a tradition, albeit for a different Church, that Franco was fighting to retain in Spain. In addition, the lingering influences and connections of the British Churches on their Canadian cousins may have had some effect. In Britain during the Civil War, prominent Anglican and Methodist prelates and clergy organized the United Christian Front Committee to engender Protestant support for Franco.⁸⁴

Ambivalence characterizes the attitude of the English-Catholic press to Protestants during the War. The *Catholic Record* could point to "a monstrous conspiracy in the English-Protestant world to discredit the avowed foes of Communism in Spain and to support the revealed enemies of Christianity and democracy." This it ascribed to that religion's greater hatred of Catholicism over communism.⁸⁵ *The New Outlook*, the national organ of the social gospel-oriented United Church and a staunch supporter of the Republic,⁸⁶ was singled out for particular attack. Its articles were condemned as the 'bubbling of bigotry,'

⁸⁰ Harkness, *op. cit.*, p. 302-03.

⁸¹ Father Daly's comment in 1920 is indicative. "With Them [Protestants] Christianity is nothing more than social welfare inspired by a vague philanthropy." Daly, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁸² Peck, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁸³ N.K. Clifford, "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society: An Historiographic Review," *Church History*, 1969, p. 513-14.

⁸⁴ *Catholic Register*, October 14, 1937.

⁸⁵ *Catholic Record*, May 29, 1937.

⁸⁶ Prang, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

“dangerous propaganda,” and the appropriate Church authorities were requested to investigate the magazine.⁸⁷

Concurrent with these broadsides, the Catholic press was attempting to find support for the Franco cause among prominent Protestants. Great play was given to statements and activities of Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*,⁸⁸ and the United Christian Front Committee in Britain. The vital connection, however, in the person of a prominent Canadian Protestant outspokenly pro-Nationalist, remained elusive. The best the *Catholic Register* could produce was Sir Auckland Geddes, a former principal of McGill University. Sir Auckland lived in Britain during the War as the chairman of the Rio Tinto Company that operated mines in Spain. He made it plain he much preferred Franco to the Loyalists on the utilitarian grounds that his company never experienced strikes or disruptions in Nationalist territory.⁸⁹

PRO-LOYALISTS

Beyond the secular and Protestant press, the main focus of the Catholic newspapers' offensive concerned manifestations of pro-Loyalist activity and the obligation of the Canadian government to restrain them. Its *bêtes noires* in the pro-Loyalist movement were the Canadian committee to Aid Spanish Democracy and the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.

The Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy was a joint CCF – communist effort to harness moral and financial support for the Republic in Canada. It was headed up by such left-wing notables and social gospellers as Graham Spry, Tim Buck, Rev. Salem Bland and Rev. Ben Spence. It possessed a central office in Toronto and had a network of branches in the larger cities throughout the country.⁹⁰ The Committee was conceived and operated as a vast propaganda agency. Its first initiative was the hosting of a trans-Canada speaking and fund-raising tour of three prominent Loyalists, including a Franciscan priest, Father Luis Sarasola.⁹¹ Nothing could have been more likely to kindle visceral Catholic reaction than the presence of a priest in a delegation representing the side admittedly responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Catholic priests. In Montreal, in face of the ominous possibility of rioting, the delegation was denied

⁸⁷ *Catholic Record*, May 29, 1937; April 30, 1938.

⁸⁸ Guttman, *op. cit.*, p. 55-56.

⁸⁹ *Catholic Register*, May 20, 1937.

⁹⁰ Hoar, *op. cit.*, p. 9-10, 38, 100-101.

⁹¹ The other two were Marolino Domingo, a former education minister in the Republican government, and Senora Polencia, Republican Ambassador to Sweden.

a civic permit to hold a public assembly. This denial of civil liberties was heartily approved in the English-Catholic press. The *Prairie Messenger* acknowledged freedom of speech as a “priceless treasure” but freedom became license

as soon as it is used to spread ideas that are in the long run harmful to society.

Those who oppose the propaganda of the delegates from the Spanish government have every reason to justify their curbing of the freedom of speech on the ground that this delegation is speaking for a government whose close connection with Bolshevism is well-known...*Christians can most reasonably expect that whatever is prejudicial to Christ the King should be banned.*⁹²

In English Canada, where the emissaries played to packed houses, they were a target of sustained attack in the Catholic press. The delegates' tour was described as “an invasion by a troop of Spanish propagandists under Russian auspices.”⁹³ Father Sarasola was depicted as an “apostate priest” who had betrayed his faith and was challenged repeatedly to present his credential to the Catholic bishops in the dioceses where he was scheduled to speak.⁹⁴

Subsequent pro-Loyalist propaganda and fund-raising tours of Dr. Norman Bethune and the Duchess of Atholl⁹⁵ held under the Committee's auspices fared no better. Bethune, “an avowed champion of the Spanish Reds” “goes out of his way to spread communist propaganda and gives clear proof that he is really out for the cause of communism in all its redness and with all its implications.”⁹⁶

As the Committee's activities multiplied it came under greater and greater fire in the Catholic press. The Committee was

⁹² *Prairie Messenger*, November 11, 1936, italics mine; see also *Social Forum*, November, 1937.

⁹³ *Catholic Register*, October 29, 1936.

⁹⁴ *Catholic Register*, October 29, 1936; *Catholic Record*, November 7, 1936; *Prairie Messenger*, November 11, 1936.

⁹⁵ The Duchess of Atholl was a veteran British Conservative M.P. and her party's former ship in the House of Commons. She, along with Winston Churchill, were leaders of the anti-Franco wing of the British Conservative party. Watkins, *op.cit.*, p. 84-85.

⁹⁶ *New Freeman*, July 17, 1937; *British Columbia Catholic*, August 14, 1937.

an organized hypocrisy and is obtaining money under false pretenses by soliciting in Canada for 'Spanish Democracy' when the money goes to those who hate and despise Democracy and stand for Social Revolution.⁹⁷

Sharing the opprobrium with the Committee were the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion and its Canadian lifeline, the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, a group devoted to the care and welfare of the volunteers in Spain.⁹⁸ The volunteers themselves were depicted more as "Canadian dupes in the Communist International Army"⁹⁹ than as the masterminds of the revolution. They were "fighting in Spain but not for Spain; they are fighting for Moscow; neither are they fighting for democracy; they are fighting for Communism."¹⁰⁰ The *Catholic Register* could barely contain its satisfaction after a perusal of casualty lists showed that "only a minority of the names... have the appearance of belonging to the two great races long-established in Canada."¹⁰¹ It initially opposed their re-entry into the country asking

Why should Canada take the risks of admitting men who represent the forces of International Revolution and who would be the experienced fighters to take the lead in civil war in Canada when the Red conspirators want to provoke violence here.¹⁰²

With the impending defeat of the Republic and the disbandment of the brigades, the paper relented somewhat and offered a stem of forgiveness

For their sins and errors they have surely suffered but a reckoning should be demanded from those in Canada who conspired to lead them into this wicked adventure.¹⁰³

It was this idea of "reckoning" and from whom and in what way it should be extracted that involved the Canadian government. Although Mackenzie King, like

⁹⁷ *Catholic Register*, May 13, 1937.

⁹⁸ Hoar, *op. cit.*, p. 31, 101.

⁹⁹ *Catholic Register*, November 4, 1937.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, June 3, 1937.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, November 4, 1937.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, November 4, 1937.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, February 9, 1939.

most English-Canadians, sympathized with the Republic,¹⁰⁴ the legislative actions of his government as regards the War were consistent with his foreign policy themes of disentanglement and support of Britain. The legislative expression of this policy was the passage of the *Foreign Enlistment Act* and amendments to the *Customs Act* in April 1937. The former prohibited not only military assistance to the enemies of a friendly state but authorized the government by order-in-council to apply it “with necessary modifications to any case where there is a state of armed conflict, civil or otherwise, either within a foreign country or between foreign countries.”¹⁰⁵ The latter bill provided for the same thing in the same way with respect to arms and munitions.¹⁰⁶ The legislation was triggered in July – August, 1937 with the adoption of a series of orders-in-council applying to

Spain.¹⁰⁷

The passage and application to Spain of this legislation was welcomed in the Catholic press.¹⁰⁸ It demanded, however, that the Acts be immediately and strictly enforced. The Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion and the Communist Party were accused of violating the legislation and an investigation was sought. More specifically, it called for a public exposure of the recruitment, financing and transport of the volunteers to Spain.¹⁰⁹ The removal of the word ‘Canadian’ from many organizations associated with the War, a public accounting of all funds collected and transferred, and a channelling of all relief donations through the Red Cross were requested.¹¹⁰ When nothing was seemingly done to effect these demands, the *Catholic Register* bitterly complained that the legislation was “a farce of non-intervention in Spain as the Communist party continued recruiting and the Friends of Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion continued collecting funds from coast to coast for the Red fighters.”¹¹¹ As the War wound down, however, and a Nationalist victory approached, the issue of the role of the Canadian government in controlling pro-Loyalist activity, which never loomed large in any event, subsided.

¹⁰⁴ King Papers, King to J.L. Counsel, n.d. given, cited in Hoar, *op. cit.*, p. 105-106.

¹⁰⁵ The legislation is reproduced in F.H. Soward, *Canada in World Affairs: The Pre-War Years* (Toronto, 1941), p. 313-319.

¹⁰⁶ Legislation reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 319-320.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 321-333.

¹⁰⁸ *New Freeman*, August 7, 1937.

¹⁰⁹ *Catholic Register*, January 13, 1938

¹¹⁰ *New Freeman*, August 7, September 18, 1937; March 9, 1938.

¹¹¹ *Catholic Register*, August 13, 1937

AN EVALUATION

On March 27, 1939 Madrid surrendered and the Spanish Civil War came to an end. Consistent with its view from the outbreak of the conflict, the Canadian English-language Catholic press joyfully anticipated what the future held for Spain under Franco

What a different world it would be if the heads of other States possessed such a sublime conception of their duties to God and to their people! Then indeed would they lead their nations in the ways of justice and peace.¹¹²

The Spanish Civil War as fought out for the hearts and minds of English-Canadians was essentially a battle of the press. This was preponderantly true on the Loyalist side and almost exclusively so as regards the proponents of the Nationalists. In this battle of words, the weapons of choice were illusion, fantasy and myth. To Loyalist sympathizers – the secular and Protestant press, the Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, elements of the CCF, and indeed the mass of English-speaking Canadians – the War was perceived and propagated as a struggle between the forces of morality and liberal democracy against totalitarian fascism. Conversely, Nationalist supporters interpreted the conflict as a confrontation between Christian civilization and atheistic communism. The hard objective reality was that it was neither. What the Civil War represented in essence was the culmination of an historical process of truly domestic nature and proportions, the ultimate clash between the forces of progress and tradition within Spanish society. The War was not imported from abroad and had little to do with either communism or fascism. Blinded by ideological prejudice and/or religious commitment that shaped their conceptual framework, advocates of both the Loyalist and Nationalist causes in English-Canada allowed this elemental certitude to elude their grasp.

In English-Canada, the principal and almost the only¹¹³ champions and defenders of the Franco cause were Roman Catholics. They arrived at their position from their skewed perception of the nature and causes of the War. Imbued in a

¹¹² *British Columbia Catholic*, September 16, 1939.

¹¹³ English-Canadian fascists, who operated on the margins of society and who were essentially insignificant, also supported Franco. Also a very few secular newspapers and periodicals, notably the *Montreal Gazette*, exercised a sort of benevolent neutrality toward the Nationalists by at least pointing out the faults of their adversaries.

tradition of one universal Church and a “Catholic Spain,” hierarchy, clergy and lay elite could not distinguish between the Church in Spain and the Church in Canada. Their realities could not have been more different. In Spain, the Church, through its too close identification with the monarchy and as servant to the wealthy, had alienated and antagonized the Spanish masses. In English-Canada this same Church ministered faithfully to a lower-class constituency and had little association with the establishment. These vital distinctions were lost on Canadian Catholics. Of far greater, if not sole significance, was that the Catholic Church was being persecuted in Spain. Already suspicious of and hostile to the socialist and anti-clerical proclivities of the Popular Front government of the Spanish Republic, it was one short step into the Nationalist camp when the military uprising provoked massive indiscriminate butchery of Catholic religious. This event alone shaped and cemented the English-Catholic Church leadership’s attitude and outlook on the War. They could not but oppose those who had perpetrated such a bloodbath and support *in toto* those who offered the Church sustenance and protection.

The brunt of elaborating and broadcasting this interpretation fell to the Catholic press. In the schema of Catholic thought, the press was viewed as “part and parcel of the teaching and elevating equipment of the Church.”¹¹⁴ However, the great role envisaged for it by Pius X found little realization in English-Canada. Under tight episcopal control, stiflingly uniform in content, American-oriented, and of pedestrian quality, its readership was apparently confined mainly to clergy and lay activists with little audience among the Catholic masses and none beyond.

The ultimate goal of the Catholic press’ treatment of the War was to reassure and instruct Catholics on the righteousness of the Nationalist cause. With this accomplished, the influencing of a hostile non-Catholic opinion through the offices of a well-briefed faithful became a possibility. As an indication of the importance attached to this task, the Spanish Civil War became the predominant issue in the English-language Catholic press from 1936-39 and far overshadowed any other national or international event. Literally thousands of news dispatches and articles were printed on the outbreak and progress of the War and its repercussions in terms of Catholic and non-Catholic support for Franco and the Nationalists in other countries. Editorial response was framed from the character of such reports against a backdrop of the Church’s ingrained fear of communism. The central theme into which events were integrated was a holy crusade against communism. To the *Catholic Record*, “the... war is to save Spain from Bolshevism and the Christian culture of Spain from Communism. It is a war against war on Christianity.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ *Prairie Messenger*, November 7, 1936.

¹¹⁵ *Catholic Record*, November 7, 1936.

The bitterness and virulence which greeted expressions of pro-Loyalist sentiment in Canada derived from bewilderment and distress at the fact that people, probably the majority, could champion a cause drenched in the blood of Catholic martyrs. In supporting the Loyalists, they were attacking the Catholic Church. The secular press was targeted for sustained and unreasoning attack because of the Catholic conviction that this institution was responsible for creating and shaping the public opinion that appeared so hostile to their cause.

In carrying out its task to report and editorialize on the Spanish Civil War, the English-language Catholic press in Canada was being true to its historic mission. As the *Catholic Register* exclaimed

A Canadian Catholic newspaper has the right and duty to defend the Church in Spain and to condemn those who attack the Church with fire and sword.¹¹⁶

The upshot was that in reporting and interpreting the war solely from this sectarian dimension, its wider significance as a social struggle between the wealthy classes and the landless masses and growing urban proletariat was eclipsed.

An unanswered question that flows from this study of the Catholic press and the Civil War is how reflective was it of Catholic opinion generally.¹¹⁷ Was there the almost total unanimity and depth of feeling on the War among English-Catholics that a perusal of their press would indicate? The available evidence is conflicting.

On the one hand, the absence of any individual openly identified as Catholic supporting the Republic is striking. What little dissent there was tended to neutrality or only a qualified endorsement of the Nationalist cause. Yet suspicions of Loyalist support, especially among some working-class English-Catholics, persist.

The passage of a *unanimous* resolution of sympathy for the Spanish Republic at the Trades and Labour Congress convention in the autumn of 1936 is a case in

¹¹⁶ *Catholic Register*, January 27, 1938.

¹¹⁷ The American experience is indicative. Gallop polls taken during the War indicate only four in ten Catholics supported the Nationalists with the remaining six almost equally divided between “no opinion” and actually favouring the Republic. This situation accrued despite the almost unanimous support in the American Catholic press for Franco. Guttman, *op.cit.*, p. 202-203. Dr. Gallop didn’t come to Canada until 1943.

point.¹¹⁸ Were there no Catholics at this convention? If there were, why didn't they object? Or again, there is the adoption of another sympathy resolution of the largely Catholic miners of the United Mine Workers of America (District 26) at Truro, Nova Scotia in 1938.¹¹⁹ A detailed study of English-Canadian Catholic labour might show the precedence of class over religion as determining attitude to the War.

As regards the intensity of Catholic commitment to the Nationalist side in English-Canada, one is struck by rarity of expressions of overt support and activity beyond the Catholic press. Unlike the American and British Catholic experiences, no joint pastorals were issued by the national hierarchy, no fund-raising was undertaken, few major rallies were held and no committees established. Indeed there are very few indications of advocacy and enterprise among the Catholic faithful.

This lack of pro-Nationalist activity, which stands in stark contrast to the efforts made by the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy on behalf of the Loyalists, is perhaps attributable to peculiar evolution of the Catholic Church in Canada. Monolithic in name only, the Church's development is tracked in perpetual conflict between French and Irish prelates and clerics. Further, the efforts of the French hierarchy to frustrate Irish leadership pretensions by fostering a culturally pluralistic approach to the religious and social needs of the recently arrived Western immigrants slowed the assimilation process. The result was that in the 1930's, outside of Quebec, the Catholic Church was much more culturally divergent than in the United States. This reality, compounded by French-Irish discord, inhibited joint action on the part of the hierarchy. The striking absence in the 1930's of a national episcopal organization, a Canadian Catholic conference, to set policy, co-ordinate effort and treat problems is testimony to the legacy of this dissension. Indeed, from 1936 to 1939, the Canadian Catholic bishops held not one annual meeting. The primacy of Cardinal Villeneuve was nominal and he played no significant role in Church affairs in English-Canada. Without a central focus to initiate, to rouse, and to energize, Catholic efforts on behalf of Nationalist Spain could not but remain local and disjointed.

The absence of domestic fall-out from the War in terms of an embargo controversy such as experienced by the Americans raises the question of cause/effect relationship. Unlike the United States, almost all groups in Canadian society – French, imperialist, isolationist – supported the neutrality legislation as evidenced by the *Foreign Enlistment Act* and amendments to the *Customs Act*. Why the maintenance or lifting of the embargo in America inspired such disputation and agitation is attributable to the crucial role that country could

¹¹⁸ Richard Martin, "Le Congrès des Métiers et du Travail et la guerre civile espagnole," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française*, mars 1980, p. 575-581.

¹¹⁹ *Catholic Record*, September 24, 1938.

play as an arms merchant to the Republic. Canada had no such potential so the issue of the Dominion's own embargo never really held centre stage and engendered little debate and contention.

The legacy of bitterness in Catholic-Protestant relations and the alienation and isolation of American Catholics from the larger society that ensued from the War¹²⁰ seems to have had no parallel in English-Canada. The election of R.J. Manion, an Irish Catholic politician, to the leadership of the Conservative party in 1938 tends to belie the existence of this phenomenon in Canada. It is probable that because the advocacy of the Nationalist cause was almost exclusively limited to the columns of a press which preached to the converted, few beyond were consciously aware that a campaign in support of General Franco was actually occurring.

¹²⁰ Valaik, *op. cit.*, p. 249, 290, 296.