

## *Not for King or Country: Edward Cecil-Smith, the Communist Party of Canada, and the Spanish Civil War* by Tyler Wentzell

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don and on various Liberals, hearing out the idea's critics without conceding their points. A favourite section of mine weighs the influence of George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*, concluding ultimately that solidarity with national liberation movements (particularly Cuba's) contributed more to new leftists' nationalism than Grant's tragic Toryism, which was mainly useful for attracting allies from outside the left. I don't find myself completely convinced, but it's an interesting question and it's approached thoughtfully, with ample evidence. I expect other readers will have a similar reaction to other sections of the book, and be impressed by the depth of engagement the authors give these arguably passing points.

Partly because the narrative extends well beyond the 1960s, *Radical Ambition's* understanding of the new left isn't tethered completely to youth. It engages with the promise and threat offered by educated middle-class professionals, especially academics, but also librarians and social workers, in challenging the status quo. A particularly vivid example is the 1970 burglary and arson of the offices of Praxis, a kind of new left think tank focusing on questions of poverty and participatory democracy, that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had investigated, and right-wing journalist Peter Worthington had pilloried, as a source of

potential trouble. Battles over the Spadina Expressway and the city's neighbourhood public libraries, as well as schools and colleges, theatre and the visual arts, are examined in terms of their new left resonance, alongside detailed accounts of the vagaries of various far left organizations through the 1970s and early 1980s.

*Radical Ambition* is undoubtedly exhaustively researched, and highly ambitious in its breadth. Nearly every page is filled with untold stories and remarkable insights. The range of sites it takes seriously as places of politics is awesome, and its insistence on examining their interconnections is undeniably fruitful. But the book is too long. It's often unclear, especially in the first chapter, when readers are deciding whether to stick with it, what it's going to be about. It is not quite encyclopedic in its scope, but it's also not entirely a coherent narrative. Being broad is important to its thesis; the capaciousness of its idea of its subject is central to its laudable politics. But the length of the book and the looseness of its argument makes it less useful to scholars and teachers and less accessible to non-scholars hoping to understand the new left, than a volume half its size would have been.

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### *Not for King or Country*

*Edward Cecil-Smith, the Communist Party of Canada, and the Spanish Civil War*

by Tyler Wentzell

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 368 pages. \$29.96

Paper. ISBN 9781487522889 (utorontopress.com)

Tyler Wentzell's *Not for King or Country* is a fascinating biography of overlooked historical figure Edward Cecil-Smith. So-

cialist turned soldier, Cecil-Smith served in the Spanish Civil War, helped found the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, and

became the conflict's highest-ranking Canadian volunteer. Cecil-Smith was one of the 1,700 Canadians who volunteered to fight "for values that transcended national boundaries" (93). Cecil-Smith's reasons for volunteering reflected his own changing ideologies, at a time when liberalism, communism, and fascism all contended as "viable solutions" to the Great Depression's social, political, and economic turmoil (6). Wentzell's book develops the limited historiography of the efforts of Canadians in the Spanish Civil War and extends to answer why volunteers—against the federal government's wishes—chose to fight for the republican- and communist-led international brigades.

Edward Cecil-Smith was born in 1903 to British missionary parents in China's Guizhou province. After completing his education at the China Inland Mission's Chefoo School, he soon moved to Canada in 1919. Settling in Toronto, he joined the militia of the Canadian Engineers and attained the rank of sergeant major before leaving the Corps in 1928 (20). He started writing for both the *Mail and Empire* and the *Toronto Daily Star*. His early experiences in China and Canada founded his understandings about politics and the international labour movement.

Cecil-Smith's radicalization continued as he began immersing himself in Toronto's socialist movements. In 1930, he joined



the Canadian Labour Defence League—what Wentzell calls Cecil-Smith's "gateway into the Communist Party" (26). He soon became a card-carrying member of the Communist Party of Canada and started writing for the *Worker* and later the *Daily Clarion*. In 1931, Cecil-Smith carefully reported on the federal government's Section 98, a law that banned the CPC and led to its leaders' arrests (34). Cecil-Smith's radicalization occurred in a period

of Canadian left history marked by police surveillance and government suppression.

Chapters Four and Five explore the relationship between art, propaganda, and the Canadian left. As a writer, Cecil-Smith added to the CPC's intellectual and propaganda literati, believing that art could be used "as a weapon of class struggle" (61). He found like-minded individuals in both the Worker's Experimental Theater and the Progressive Arts Club. In 1933, he co-wrote and performed in the play *Eight Men Speak*, an agitprop that portrayed the arrests and trials of Tim Buck and the other CPC leaders. The police shut down the play after one performance (55). Although deviating somewhat from the book's biographical narrative, these two chapters are particularly interesting. Through Cecil-Smith, Wentzell's book explores the Canadian left's use of agitprop theatre and the larger influences of "art in revolutionary politics" (59). More importantly, the book

speaks to those tensions between middle-class intellectualism and working-class radicalism—an ideological schism of class and ethnicity that challenged the Canadian left through the radical 1930s (32).

Wentzell's book does well comparing Cecil-Smith's own, sometimes conflicted, ideologies to those of a changing party. *Not for King or Country* emphasizes the political complexities of the Canadian left through the Third Period and the Popular Front, as they mobilized against the growing fascist threat. For Cecil-Smith, and other militantly-minded socialists, the Comintern's call to fight in the Spanish Civil War represented an opportunity for international revolution—a chance to fight fascism with the workers of the world.

The book's second half follows Cecil-Smith through the Spanish Civil War, as he joins the near 45,000 international volunteers heeding the call to fight. Lending his own militia experience, he served as a training instructor for the XVth International Brigade. He was also part of a small group of Canadians who lobbied to have their own battalion (118). The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion—the Mac-Paps—officially formed 1 July 1937. Although injuries kept Cecil-Smith from joining the new battalion through the summer, he became its lead commander by November 1937 (136).

Wentzell's book sees Cecil-Smith and the Mac-Paps through Spain in 1938, highlighting their success in the Battle of Teruel and in the defence of Atalaya. There were, however, losses and retreats. An attack outside Azuara and ensuing attacks on the way to Alcaniz, for example, desolated the battalion's numbers (167). Despite valiant efforts in the Ebro Offensive, they also came up short against nationalist forces. Wentzell's book captures the daily move-

ments of the Mac-Paps and vividly narrates their military engagements through Spain.

Facing pressures of a failing republican military campaign, Canadian volunteers began their journey home in January 1939. Wentzell's book details their repatriation and examines how Canadians at the time perceived their efforts. Although Cecil-Smith ended his involvement with the CPC in 1942, his contributions to the party, to the Spanish Civil War, and to the causes of revolution are worth preserving.

Wentzell's *Not for King or Country* intriguingly blends Canadian left history and military history. The book's compelling style follows other military narratives in recounting strategic action and life on the front lines of war. Yet, it places Cecil-Smith and the Mac-Paps within a larger history of the Canadian left, emphasising the political ideologies that led so many to fight in Spain. More importantly, Wentzell's transnational story reminds us of Canadians' contributions outside their own borders, extending the role and relationships of Canadians to a larger historical framework.

Notwithstanding history's neglect of Edward Cecil-Smith, Wentzell's *Not for King or Country* offers an abundance of well-researched material. The book presents Cecil-Smith's curious and compelling story from an array of primary sources, including his published articles and personal documents, as well as school archives, military records, and RCMP files. *Not for King or Country* is a fascinating account of Cecil-Smith and is a welcome academic addition of the efforts of Canadians in the Spanish Civil War.

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