

Tyler Wentzell. *Not for King or Country: Edward Cecil-Smith, The Communist Party of Canada, and the Spanish Civil War*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Pp. 368.

The aptly named, *Not for King or Country*, explores the life of Edward Cecil-Smith. Through deep research in Canadian, Russian and other international archives, historian and Canadian Forces' officer Tyler Wentzell has produced a fine study of this complex character.

Cecil-Smith, who was born in China to a missionary family, was a true believer in the liberating and enlightening effects of communism. Upon arrival in Toronto in 1919, he had a potted career, but settled in as a journalist. After being fired by mainstream newspapers for his leftist views, he wrote and edited Marxist and Communist Party papers from the early 1930s. He and his wife, Lilian Gouge, were also involved in Toronto's counter-cultural scene, in the ongoing attempt to mobilise workers in the fight against capitalism. From this period, Cecil-Smith was under frequent surveillance by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who tracked his movement and action in what they believed was agitation against the state. The police, courts and lawmakers had some success during the Depression years in deterring communists, as they harassed party members, outlawed the party and occasionally arrested people on trumped-up charges. Furthermore, all of this surveillance led to the creation of full files on Cecil-Smith, which Wentzell has used to his advantage.

Cecil-Smith both believed and lived the communist ideals of a workers' revolution in the class struggle, but he was also a free thinker. He loved to argue and question. It was no easy thing for a debating intellectual in the dogmatic Communist Party, and this type of vocal questioning would surely have led to a bullet in the back of the head if he had lived in Stalin's Soviet Union. But in Canada it simply made him an oddity to be watched by the other political cadres. Wentzell offers a new understanding into the fringe Communist Party in Canada during the Depression, where the near collapse of capitalism seemed close, or so the party hoped, and he further deepens our understanding into some of the leaders, like Tim Buck and Tom Ewen. Equally interesting is the relationship of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the Communist Party. Both were left of the political spectrum and seeking social change, but the CCF was a real party while the communists an idealised movement whose strategic actions were often guided by

Moscow. Cecil-Smith used his pen to draw blood from CCFers, as well as all the other parties, and had a venomous dislike of J. S. Woodsworth. Like all Communist Party members in Canada, Cecil-Smith was badly duped by the Soviets who fed these Canadian comrades propaganda about the free and classless society in the Soviet Union, with all its imagined freedoms, unity and jobs, when in reality millions were starved to death in the Ukraine and other occupied countries, while millions more were deported to Gulags or murdered by the secret police.

The Spanish Civil War drew Cecil-Smith and other idealists to the cause, and Wentzell is very good at exploring the context of the war and in building upon international scholarship and, in Canada, Michael Petrou's *Renegades*. Cecil-Smith had some experience in the militia, but he was not well suited for the rigours of campaigning. Nonetheless, he was made an officer in this civil war against fascism and guided, as the title alludes, not by King or country but by the need to uphold democracy. In his words, the "future of humanity" would be decided in the killing fields of Spain from 1936 to 1939 (p. 102).

The battlefield experience is well depicted, as well as some of the horrendous engagements where the Republican infantry were hurled headlong into enemy prepared defences as cannon fodder. Cecil-Smith was not a charismatic leader, but he steadily rose through the ranks based on skill and bravery. Twice he was wounded and returned to the field. He earned the respect of the other soldiers, even as the communist political officers in the units watched him carefully. The bloodied officer would eventually command the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion from November 1937 to early 1939. It had about 500 Canadians in it and was an identifiable unit among the Allied forces who were fighting with the Republic against Franco's Nationalist Army.

Other fellow travellers are explored in this biography, and some readers will be interested in the more famous Norman Bethune, who was also in Spain with a medical unit where he was honing the art of blood transfusion on the battlefield. The magnetic Bethune seems to have had an affair with Cecil-Smith's wife, Lilian, with enough evidence to prove a physical and emotional relationship, although many of the intricate details were buried with Bethune when he died in China in 1939.

Well researched with new insights, albeit with some plodding text and abrupt chapter conclusions, Wentzell has offered a glimpse into the intellectual challenge of communism in Canada in the 1930s, Canadian involvement in the Spanish Civil War and new ways to make sense of that conflict in Canadian history. Wentzell spans several historiographies, exploring leftist thinking, state surveillance, culture, politics and war. Perhaps attesting to this overlapping study is the double supportive accounts on the book's back cover by historians J. L. Granatstein and Ian McKay. That in itself reveals the skilful manner in which Wentzell locates Cecil-Smith in the unfolding history of the 1930s until his death in 1963.

As commander of the Mac-Paps, it is surprising that Cecil-Smith is not better known, but Wentzell offers some reasons why he slipped from memory. While he was greeted home in early 1939 by thousands of cheering Torontonians, he did not write his memoirs, his and other Canadians' service in the Civil War were overshadowed by the Second World War and there were few memorials to these Canadians. Cecil-Smith was no saint as he struggled against what he saw as the evils of capitalism, the fight against injustice and the need to smash fascism, but he is a fascinating character through which to understand an aspect of Canada's complex and contested military history.

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*