

## **The inquiry into the education of Don Henry and his subsequent death in the Spanish Civil War**

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Digitized images of Don Henry's letter from Spain, the documents featured with this article, and additional documents from Don Henry's trunk are available from The Digital Classroom on the National Archives' Web site, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/don-henry/>.

The committee appointed by the Board of Regents to investigate the life and death of Don Henry concluded that the young college student had undergone a profound political change during his two years at the University of Kansas. While the committee did not attribute blame, it clearly saw Don Henry's transformation on campus as leading to his decision to enlist and his death on a foreign battlefield.

Don Henry's parents were little aware of the dramatic changes their son was undergoing during his freshman and sophomore years in college; but on the university campus, far from home, he had become a different person from the naive small-town boy they knew. On campus he was exposed to new ideas, became politically conscious and active, and was soon a leader in radical campus organizations and a communist. By September 1937, when his cohorts were beginning their junior year at the university, he had joined a foreign army and been killed on a battlefield in Spain.

Henry's death raised difficult questions about his experiences at the university and about the role of the university in general. Could the university be held responsible—as his father believed—for Don Henry's actions and decisions? Can a university provide for the free exchange of ideas and protect its students at the same time? What is the ultimate responsibility of a university to society?

The teaching activities that accompany this article are designed to encourage discussion of the impact that expanded intellectual horizons have on young men and women when they leave the security of home and high school. Not all high school graduates change as dramatically as Don Henry, but every young adult is influenced by the institutions, ideas, and individuals around him or her in developing a unique point of view in the world.

### **Don Henry's World**

When Don Henry entered the university in September 1935, the hardships of the Great Depression had caused many Americans to look for alternatives to capitalism, which seemed to have failed. As people throughout the nation searched for answers, an assortment of radical political organizations sprang up to meet the challenge. The Depression years saw the high tide of communism in the United States, and universities and labor unions were major breeding grounds for new and radical ideas. The three great political ideologies—democracy, fascism, and communism—competed for dominance in nations across the globe in a competition that would culminate in World War II and the Cold War.

In early 1936 the world focused on Spain where the February elections had installed a left-wing Popular Front government composed of communists, socialists, syndicalists, and other left-wing groups. The forces of the left and the right had fought bitterly for electoral victory ever since the abdication of Alfonso XIII in 1931 made Spain a republic. The right-wing forces composed of the old elite-monarchists, military officers, the aristocracy, landowners, and the church—feared that the revolutionary tendencies of the leftist government and sought to overthrow it by force. Led by General Fredrico Franco, the conservative forces (Nationalists) attacked the popularly elected government and its supporters (Loyalists). Both sides sought support from foreign powers.

Hoping to prevent the civil war from escalating into a general conflict, Great Britain, France, and 25 other nations agreed to follow a policy of non-intervention. The fascist governments of Italy, Germany, and Portugal, however, provided increasing support to the forces led by Franco. Almost immediately the Soviet Union offered material support to the elected government, and the Communist International organized International Brigades recruited from France, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Hungary, Poland, the United States, and other countries. Although organized by communists, the brigades included fighters from an array of anti-fascist political backgrounds.

In the United States the official view was that since the fascist powers supported the Nationalists and the Soviet Union supported the Loyalists, a victory by either side would constitute a potential threat to democratic nations. The United States responded with a moral embargo exhorting

Americans not to provide aid to either side. But many Americans saw the civil war as an illegal rebellion against the elected government and felt that the United States should support the Popular Front government. A battalion of Americans was recruited for the International Brigades and promptly chose the name Abraham Lincoln Brigade for their unit. Many of the volunteers accurately perceived the war in Spain as the first manifestation of the fascist threat and believed it necessary to begin to fight it there. Of approximately 2,800 Americans who joined the battalion, 900 died, and virtually every survivor was wounded at least once.

### **Don Henry's Life**

Don Henry's parents were bewildered when they learned their son had gone to Spain to fight and crushed when they received the news that he had been killed on the battlefield. They had not been aware of the extent of his radical activities at the university and did not learn of his enlistment in the International Brigades until he wrote them from the training camp in Spain. Their son had been a life-long member of the Methodist Church, a Sunday School attendant, a Boy Scout, a member of the local Hi-Y club, and a member of the high school debating team. He was an avid participant in patriotic activities, and he planned to work in the church after graduation from college. In vain, his parents struggled to understand why he had died.

When news of Don Henry's death reached the university, administrators discovered that he had left behind a steamer trunk containing some of his most prized possessions. They returned the trunk to his family, and as his father examined its contents, the mystery of Don Henry's short life slowly began to unfold.

The trunk contained important mementoes of Don Henry's youth: old cards and letters to his family and friends, his Boy Scout identification card, and newspaper clippings about his accomplishments on the high school debating team. But the documentation of his university years was greater, containing his personal calendars from his freshman and sophomore years, pamphlets from various organizations, newspaper clippings, meeting notices, tickets, speeches, identification cards, magazines, and books. Most of the documents from his college years concerned the activities of radical organizations.

A careful examination of the papers in his trunk revealed Henry's incremental development from naive high school graduate to sophisticated political thinker and man of action. They show how the new ways of thinking he discovered at the university altered his understanding of international events and heightened his moral indignation and how these personal changes converged to affect his life.

Soon after he arrived on campus, Don Henry found a job at the YMCA, an organization that some alleged to be controlled by communists during those years. He became active in the Kansas University Peace Action Committee and was on the editorial board of a pacifist newsletter, *The Dove*. Don Henry founded and was president of the local chapter of the American Student Union (a merger of two left-wing student organizations). By the end of his freshman year, he had joined the Young Communist League, and in his letters home he had begun to rejoice in communist victories.

### **Don Henry's Conflict**

Mr. Henry could understand his son's participation in peace rallies, the disarmament and war resistance movements, and even student strikes as an outgrowth of his moral and religious upbringing. But, why had his son gone off to fight in a war, and more baffling, why had he gone to fight for another country? The paradox of Don's transition from peace advocate to machine gunner haunted his father.

Some of the documents in his trunk reveal the conflicts with which Don Henry wrestled. A letter informing him that he had been selected to attend a Religious Officers Training Conference stressed his obligation to serve. His handwritten note on the program for the Reinterpretation of Religion Week, "God of love and justice calling on us for social action," was written by a highly moral young man.

For Henry, daily international events aroused moral dilemmas and made pacifism a problematic position to maintain. On the University of Kansas campus, the call to action was everywhere. During 1936, the *Daily Kansan* ran a series of six editorials on the Spanish civil war, extolling the cause of the Spanish Loyalists as a fight for democracy. The editorial position of *The Dove* was firmly against fascism and supported the Spanish Loyalists. Some of the most brilliant faculty members championed the cause of the Loyalists, their arguments much like those in communist

pamphlets. There were no comparable voices supporting the fascist forces under General Franco.

The December 1936 issue of *The Student Advocate* magazine that was found in Don Henry's trunk contained a romantic and moralistic article titled "Journey in Spain: 1936." Its heroic portrayal of young Spanish warriors, such as Rosita in the paragraphs below, may have helped set the atmosphere in which Don Henry chose to go to war.

Inside the barracks we found young people making preparations for a session in the front lines scheduled to begin the next day. Many of them were high-school age; many of them were girls. Despite their youth and lack of training they were on their way to do their part in this struggle to preserve democracy. They represented the youth of Spain, universally convinced that if their country was to offer them a civilized and peaceful life, it must remain a democracy. Reversion to the dictatorship which once before had limited their freedom and opportunity was one thing they would fight to the death.

Rosita was the busiest person in the barracks. She already had been to the front with the Regiment and, although only twenty-two, was the 'experienced' member of her new battalion, 'The Young Guard.' As such, she was elected the leader of a company. Her brother had been killed beside her on the Somosierra front in the first days of the uprising, but her courage had not been weakened. . . . She was typical of thousands of young people, many of them pacifists before July.

The article ended by prophetically observing that in Spain the first scenes of a world war were being enacted and that the future of world peace might depend upon the outcome of the conflict.

### **Don Henry's Final Decision**

In April of 1937, the world was horrified to learn that the Nazis had brutally bombed the little Spanish town of Guernica, trapping and indiscriminately massacring its inhabitants. Flying very low, Nazi airplanes bombed and machine-gunned the houses, woods, and streets that were filled with old people, women, and children. The entire town was on fire, cries and moans could be heard everywhere, and terrorized people were down on their knees with their arms lifted to the sky. The Guernica massacre foreshadowed the unrestricted attacks on civilian populations in World War II. The terrible images were captured by Pablo Picasso in the famous painting "Guernica," which was displayed in the Spanish Pavilion of the Paris World's Fair in June 1937.

That year, final exams at the University of Kansas started on May 27 and ended a week later on June 3. Don Henry's letter to his mother on the last day of exams explained that he and Kenneth Graeber, a senior in the Journalism Department, were going on a student tour to the Paris Exposition and that they would earn their expenses by writing about their experiences for a vaguely described news service<sup>ii</sup>.

Henry and Graeber sailed from New York on the *Acquytania* and landed in Paris where they were given tickets to the Spanish border and told that they would have to cross into Spain on foot. In a July 4, 1937, letter from Spain, Henry explained, "I have joined the International Brigade, Company Three of the MacKenzie Papineau Battalion." Although Don Henry intended to be part of a mission of mercy, working in first aid or for the Red Cross, he was placed first in an infantry company and then in machine gun service. His friend Graeber went into ambulance service, but Henry was sent to the front lines. He was killed in a drive against Belchito in Aragon on September 3, 1937. After a bullet entered his chest and pierced his lung, he died in a temporary hospital and was buried in an unmarked grave.

When his father learned the extent of his involvement in radical activities on campus, he took the evidence found in his son's trunk to the university chancellor and demanded an investigation into communist activities at the university. The chancellor wrote a preliminary report in which he described Don Henry as "glowing with a desire to right every social wrong . . . an earnest young idealist," and continued,

It is doubtful if he would have failed to find some encouragement of his point of view in any large university in the country. Such institutions derive their merit partly because they do represent almost every element in the population. The give and take of these groups is of high educational value. Moreover, it is difficult to suppress freedom of interchange of opinion. To attempt to do so by mandate drives it underground. . . . freedom of discussion breeds not disease but health.

The chancellor then referred the documentation to a committee of the Board of Regents, which examined the facts, issued another preliminary report, and, citing lack of authority, time, and

money to conduct a more thorough investigation, recommended that the documentation be referred to a higher and more powerful authority. The Board of Regents sent the documents to the Kansas State Legislature where a resolution to conduct an investigation of the material and other possibly subversive activities passed the Kansas House of Representatives, but failed in the Senate. Conflicts in the legislature arose among those who sought to investigate the case, others who feared that an investigation would threaten academic freedom, and still others who may have supported the same causes as Don Henry's.

During the turmoil of the 1930s, concerns over domestic subversion were felt throughout the nation, and in 1938 a Special Committee on Un-American Activities (also known as the Dies Committee) had been formed in the U.S. House of Representatives to investigate "the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda." Although the Kansas Legislature did not mount its own inquiry into the death of Don Henry, its members did agree on a motion to provide evidence to the Dies Committee. Unfortunately, the Special Committee had a very full agenda and did not pursue the case.

The Don Henry papers were filed away with other committee records and eventually retired to the National Archives. They remain with the records of the Dies Committee until the present day as part of the Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233. An examination of the case still presents interesting and thoughtful questions.

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### **Teaching Activities**

Open a class discussion with a question about why students continue their education after high school. Ask them how their reasons reflect their basic beliefs or values. Make a list on the chalkboard of some of the most important values your students try to live by. Discuss with them what they think the sources of these beliefs are—parents and relatives, friends, community, religion, education, newspapers or television, books, or do they seem to have always been there and eternally true? Direct them to write a reflective paragraph or journal entry in answer to the following question: Are your basic beliefs established early in life, or are they continually influenced by the things you are exposed to in school and the people with whom you associate?

Using the background information in this article, tell your students the story of Don Henry. Give each student copies of the featured documents and ask them who or what they think was responsible for Henry's death.

Divide the class into four groups to research and report to the class on the following topics.

Group one should research freedom of speech, especially in an academic setting, to determine what it is and what a university's responsibilities are to society and the students it serves. Give this group the quote below from one of the reports included in the Henry case file as a starting point for their research:

*Insofar as the faculty is concerned, there should be a distinct line between discussion of these (political) subjects and the advocacy of any form of government contrary to the existing form of American government. . . . There is no right, however, to advocate such changes in the American form or system of government by means of force, violence, or any other criminal act or by means other than those provided by the constitution itself.*

Group two should research pacifism, define it, and discuss whether or not someone who believes in peace could ever find himself or herself in a situation that requires fighting in a war.

Group three should research the Spanish Civil War and define the "so-called Loyalist forces, composed of Communists, Socialists, Anarchists, Syndicalists, and Left-Wing Republicans" mentioned in the opening of the American Coalition document.

Group four should research the work of the Special House Committee on Un-American Activities (the Dies Committee) in terms of its origin, purpose, and major activities, as well as the social and political atmosphere during the 1930s that produced organizations like the American Coalition. They should also determine when the Dies Committee became a standing committee or the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and how long HUAC continued in operation.

Direct the class to compile a list of movies about war. Help them organize the movies chronologically by the war or period they depict: wars in ancient history, the middle ages, American Revolutionary War, U.S. Civil War, World War I, Spanish Civil War, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Gulf War, and others. Submit the list to 5-7 volunteers to find out how war is portrayed in these movies. Allow time for them to report their findings to the class in a panel discussion. Ask them to consider which portrayals seem most accurate to them and why.

Read aloud the text of the two poems, *In Guernica* by Norman Rosten and *Dulce Et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen, and the excerpt from the *Student Advocate*. Ask your students to compare the depictions of war and death described in the two poems with that in the *Student Advocate* article.

Ask the students how the notions of war and death in these poems compare to those in the movies on their list. Discuss with them how and why the poems and the movies were created. Ask them to reflect in writing on reasons they think writers depict war in the ways that they do.

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### **DULCE ET DECORUM EST**

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge, Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs, And towards our distant rest began to trudge. Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind; Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time, But someone still was yelling out and stumbling And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.- Dim through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smoldering dreams, you too could pace Behind the wagon that we flung him in, And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin, If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs Bitten as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,- My friend, you would not tell with such high zest To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.

#### **-- Wilfred Owen [1893-1918]**

*The Latin quotation from the Roman poet Horace means "It is sweet and becoming to die for one's country." Wilfred Owen himself died fighting for England in World War I, a week before the armistice.*

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### **IN GUERNICA**

In Guernica the dead children were laid out in order upon the sidewalk, in their white starched dresses, in their pitiful white dresses.

On their foreheads and breasts are the little holes where death came in as thunder, while they were playing their important summer games.

Do not weep for them, madre. They are gone forever, the little ones, straight to heaven to the saints, and God will fill the bullet holes with candy.

#### **-- Norman Rosten [1914-1995]**

*The destruction of the civilian population of Guernica by fascist forces in April 1937 can be seen as a harbinger of the mass destruction in World War II. It occurred during the months that Don Henry made the decision to participate in the war.*

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Culminating activity: Provide students with the following excerpt taken from a newspaper clipping of an editorial entitled, "[Character and Education](#)," found in Henry's trunk. Ask a student to read it aloud.

"...a president of one of our great universities made a statement that at first glance seemed rather strange . . . He said that one's educational progress could not be judged by testing his intellectual development. If, said the prominent educator, we wish to know whether one is truly educated, we should inquire first about his character and second about his manners. Evidence of intellectual performance should come third... The school is a servant of the community, and it is not doing its

full part unless it seeks not only to make students competent, but to inspire them with purpose-purpose to contribute to the well-being of others.”

Lead a follow-up discussion about the nature and responsibility of a university with questions like the following: Is this statement true? What should students expect to get from going to school for twelve years? What should one expect from a college education? Why is it important to study subjects in the humanities, such as literature, world history, and philosophy? Then ask the students to reread the paragraphs they wrote for activity one and describe and account for any changes they might want to make in their original statements.

<sup>i</sup> During the early part of the century, left-wing political groups-including communists, socialists, anarchists, and other philosophies-in various nations fought among themselves; but during the 1930s these groups realized that in order to combat the right-wing threat of fascism, they would have to put away their old rivalries. Thus, the forces of the left combined to form "Popular Fronts" against fascism.

<sup>ii</sup> Like other American volunteers in Spain, Don Henry was compelled to lie about his destination since the official non- intervention policy of the U.S. government made it illegal to join the International Brigades.