

## TeachingWithDocuments

# The Inquiry into the Education of Don Henry and His Subsequent Death in the Spanish Civil War

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**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 enlistment and 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, Henry 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 a 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?

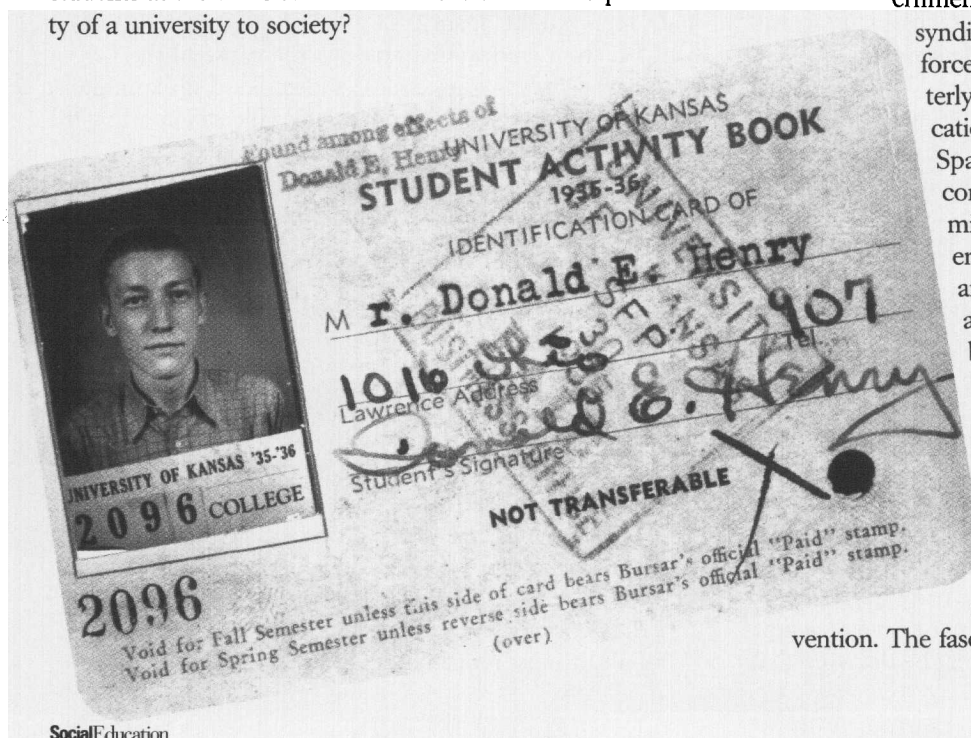
The teaching activities that accompany this article are designed to encourage discussion of the impact that expanded intellectual horizons may have on young men and women when they leave the security of home and high school. Not all high school graduates change as dramatically as Don Henry, but every 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 of Kansas 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.<sup>1</sup> The forces of the left and the right had fought bitterly for electoral victory ever since the abdication of King Alfonso XIII in 1931 made Spain a republic. The right-wing forces—composed of the old elite of monarchists, military officers, the aristocracy, landowners, and the church—feared the revolutionary tendencies of the leftist government and sought to overthrow it by force. Led by General Francisco 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 a 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 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 before leaving home. 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 also joined the Young Communist League, and in his letters home he had begun to rejoice in communist victories.

### Don Henry's Conflict

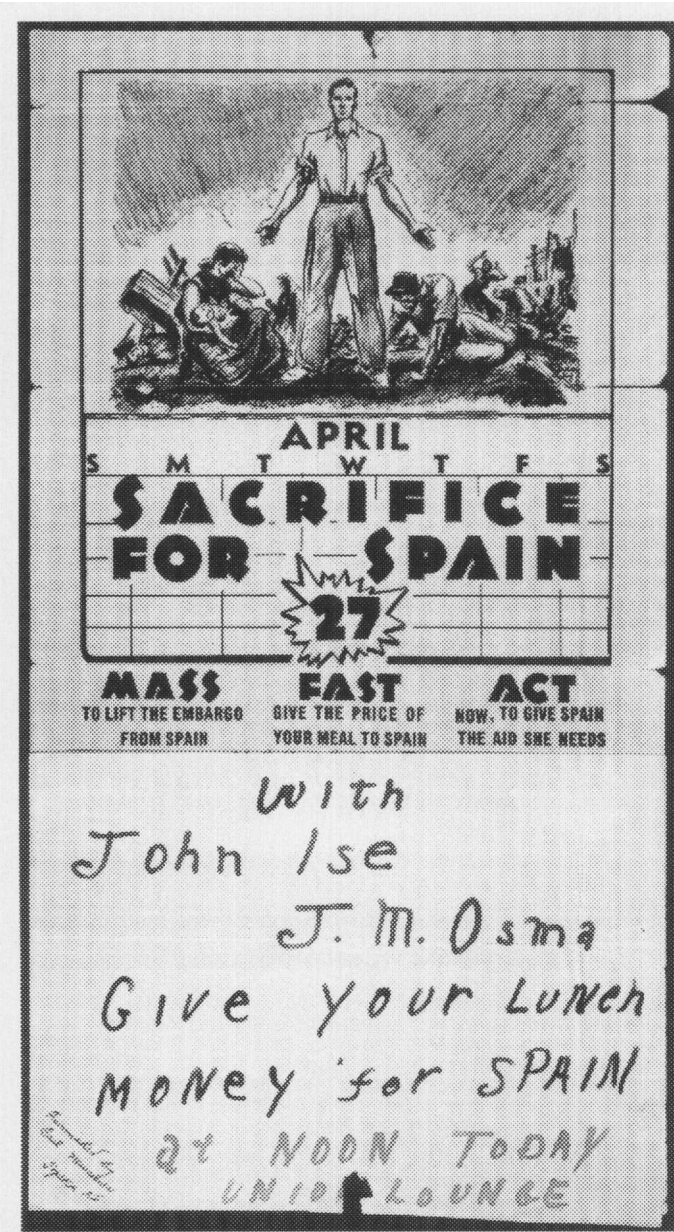
Mr. Henry could understand his son's participation in peace rallies, the disarmament and war resistance movements, and even student strikes, as an outgrowth of his moral and religious upbringing. But, why had his son gone off to fight in a war, and more baffling, why had he gone to fight for another 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 ethical dilemmas and made pacifism a problematical 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 found in communist pamphlets. There were no comparable voices supporting the fascist forces under General Franco.

The December 1936 issue of *The Student Advocate* magazine 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



Among the contents of Don Henry's trunk.

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 houses, woods, and streets 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>2</sup>

Henry and Graeber sailed from New York on the *Acquitania* 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 Henry's involvement in the radical activities on campus, he took the evidence found in his son's trunk to the university chancellor and demanded an investigation of communist activities at the university. In his preliminary summary, the chancellor 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 on the Board of Regents, which examined the facts, issued another preliminary report, and then—citing lack of authority, time, and money to conduct a more thorough

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Socorro Road

Dr. Henry  
~~International Red Aid~~  
No. 270  
Plaza de ALTAZANO  
ALBACETE, SPAIN

Dr. E. R. Henry  
2300 Sedgewick  
University Heights  
New York, N.Y.

July 4, 1937

DEAR Ed:

I am addressing this letter to you and expect it to be sent on to the folks at home for paper and postage is very scarce here in Spain.

I have joined the International Brigade, Company Three of the MacKenzie Papineau Battalion. It is a Canadian Battalion but over half of the

force is composed of U.S. Citizens. When training is over I expect to be moved - along with the other Americans - into the newly formed Patrick Henry Battalion or the George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

About the proposed trip to France and tour of all of Europe, I can only say it was a hoax for the delicate position of comrades headed for Spain made it necessary to conceal all information of our actual destination. Also for the same reason I cannot say how exactly we came to be here or where exactly we are in Spain but the

skin worn away.

All of us here are perfectly aware of the dangers involved in this war yet we are positive that this method of fighting fascism is the correct method and we intend to give our lives, if necessary, to maintain the independence of Spain. Another fascist gain in the world would mean another invitation to world war and gangster government. The political situation here is not much different than the political situation of the U.S. in 1776 when the French people helped

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the U.S. throw off the yoke of the British monarch. Because the masses believed in a democratic govt. Now U.S. citizens close their eyes to an assault on a democratic people and in doing that are actually aiding the spread of fascism. You may say that we are suffering from the same delusions that the world war veterans suffered in 1918 but the political line up is entirely different with a threat not to bourgeois government but to a genuine proletarian mass move-

investigation—recommended that the documentation be referred to a higher 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 led to the creation in 1938 of a Special Committee on Un-American Activities in the U.S. House of Representatives. Chaired by Texas conservative Martin Dies, the so-called "Dies Committee" was charged with investigating "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. However, the Special Committee had a very full agenda, and did not pursue the matter.

The documents found in Don Henry's trunk remain in 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, at the National Archives and Records Administration. An examination of the case still presents interesting and thoughtful questions.

### Teaching Activities

1. Open a class discussion with a question about why students continue their education after high school. Ask students 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 these beliefs seem to have always been there and to be 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?
2. Using the background information in this article, tell your students the story of Don Henry. Give each student a copy of the two featured documents (excerpts from a 16-page letter dated July 4, 1937, from Don Henry to his uncle and a document prepared by the right-wing American Coalition). Ask students who or what they think was responsible for Henry's death.
3. Divide the class into four groups to research and report to the class on the following topics.
  - a. 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 to the students it serves. Give this group the quote below from the chancellor's report 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.
  - b. 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.
  - c. 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.
  - d. 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 of the 1930s that produced organizations like the American Coalition. They should also determine when the Dies committee became a standing committee of the House (the House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC), and how long HUAC continued in operation.
4. Read aloud the text of the two poems, "Dulce Et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen and "In Guernica" by Norman Rosten, which appear in the box on page 141. Ask your students to compare the depictions of war and death described in these two works. (Note 1: 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. Note 2: 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 his decision to participate in the war.)
5. Culminating Activity. Provide students with the following excerpt taken from a newspaper clipping 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

## DON HENRY

### A Young Victim of Communist Propaganda

DON HENRY, OF DODGE CITY, KANSAS, A YOUNG AMERICAN BOY AND SOPHOMORE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS, LIES DEAD AS A RESULT OF INJURIES RECEIVED ON A SPANISH BATTLEFIELD WHILE SERVING WITH THE SO-CALLED LOYALIST FORCES, COMPOSED OF COMMUNISTS, SOCIALISTS, ANARCHISTS, SYNDICALISTS AND LEFT-WING REPUBLICANS.

EXCERPTS FROM KANSAS NEWSPAPERS OF OCTOBER 6 AND 7, 1937, TELL THE STORY TO THEIR READERS.

The Dodge City Daily Globe of October 6 reports that: "Mr. Henry" (the father of the boy), "says evidence of communistic influences have piled up as the family proceeded with a minute examination of the boy's effects. Membership application blanks and stubs, giving names and addresses of students, indicate young Henry had been handling applications at K. U. for the Young Communist League, the American Student Union and the Y. M. C. A., in all three of which he was active."

#### ANOTHER NEWSPAPER REPORTS:

"Mute bits of evidence of the influences that sent Henry to his death in Spain piled up as his family and friends proceeded with a close examination of his effects. Clippings, literature, and propaganda of all shades from pale pink to deep red indicate by their dates how he was swept from mild liberalism to militant communism during his two years at the university.

"The tragic trail leads from his Boy Scout mementoes, patriotic clippings, and Sunday School papers he had collected as a wholesome youth in a sound home environment before he left Dodge City for Lawrence, to Marxist literature and finally a communist organizer's manual. Through association with members of various 'peace action' activities and publications he apparently was led by progressive steps from a normal love of peace to the 'peace policy of the Soviet Union.' \* \* \*

"Evidence found in his trunk showed that the American Student Union, of which Don Henry was local president at K. U., was formed in January, 1936, by a merger of the communistic National Student League and the socialistic Student League for Industrial Democracy."

Advocating an investigation, still another Kansas publication says: "It is too late to save Mr. Henry's boy, but it is not too late to keep other sons and daughters of Kansas from exposing themselves to the malignant disease of Communism."

It is stated by one of the newspapers reporting this case that: "The merging convention took place in the Y. W. C. A. quarters at Columbus, Ohio, over the protests of the American Legion there, after Ohio State University officials had rescinded permission for use of its buildings by the radical assembly."

### The Case of Don Henry Points a Moral to Every Parent in the United States!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO PROTECT YOUR BOYS AND  
GIRLS IN OUR SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND SOCIAL WELFARE IN-  
STITUTIONS, FROM CONTAMINATION BY THE KIND OF PROPAGA-  
GANDA WHICH SENT DON HENRY TO HIS DEATH?

JOHN B. TREVOR,

President  
American Coalition.

November, 1937.

Additional copies at cost from the  
AMERICAN COALITION  
Southern Building, Washington, D. C.

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 such as: Is this statement true? What should students expect 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 students to reread the paragraphs they wrote for Activity 1. Do they still agree with what they wrote? If not, how would they amend or change their original statements? ❖

#### Notes

1. 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.
2. 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.

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Digitized images of the full documents featured in this article, along with additional documents from Don Henry's trunk, are available from The Digital Classroom on the National Archives' website at [www.nara.gov/education](http://www.nara.gov/education). Teachers have recommended using these documents to help students understand the Tiananmen Square incident and the U.S. antiwar movement of the 1960s.

#### 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]

#### 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]