We Are History, We Are Legend

*Perspectives of American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War*
Introduction

Disguised as tourists on Christmas Day in 1936, the first Americans boarded the S.S. Normandie in New York and headed off to Spain to fight for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. Ultimately, between 750-1600 American volunteers would be killed, a 25-50% casualty rate, making it by far the highest for American forces in any war. The motives that convinced more than 3,000 Americans to leave their life in the United States to take part in a foreign war are as diverse as the volunteers themselves. While a majority of the volunteers were affiliated with communism, for the most part it was not the primary driving factor in their decision to fight, but rather their development of internationalist and antifascist attitudes. They joined the International Brigades in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the George Washington Battalion, as well as in the Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. Because of the merging of units due to the high casualty rates, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (ALB), the most popular brigade, has become a loose term to regard all American units.

The study of the American volunteers is a source of much controversy and confusion, their image often distorted by historians in some form or another. On one hand, this distortion has resulted in their involvement in the fight against fascism achieving “almost mythic status,”\(^1\) being attributed to the heroic defense of democracy, freedom, and American ideals. In creating the legend, some historians have tried to downplay the influence of communism, which has a long history of negative connotations among Americans. On the other hand, some historians have attributed their involvement much more strongly with communism and have sought to portray the more sinister side and the internal strife of American voluntarism. The ALB was once celebrated for heroism, yet today many textbooks neglect the issue of American

involvement altogether. However, as Peter Carroll remarked at a memorial dedication, “We need to remember the Lincoln Brigade. We need to remember why they fought.” Understanding the complex ideological and personal factors at play in American voluntarism in relation to the social, political, and global dynamics of the time can help us understand the present condition of war and humanity. It may also help us answer the primordial question posed by one volunteer: “Is it possible to win the good fight?”

The American Volunteer

American volunteers came from all walks of life: rich and poor, black and white, Jewish and Catholic, old and young. However, they did not represent a cross-section of the United States. Though they ranged in age from eighteen to sixty, the majority were single males in their middle to late twenties. While most came from blue collar jobs, including steel workers, electricians, drivers, mechanics, and seamen, there were also many teachers, accountants, clerks, union organizers, physicians, artists, poets, and writers. American intellectuals were overwhelmingly attracted to the Republican cause, the most famous perhaps being Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell. Considering that soldiers only received “18¢ a day and at the front 21¢ a day,” money cannot explain “why 3000 Americans, most of them with jobs have left them for a similar purpose” said volunteer John Cookson, who gave up his job as a physicist to go to Spain. Most of the volunteers were communist, with an estimated sixty-five to eighty percent having some affiliation with the communism. About one third had been born abroad,

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and more than three quarters had parents who had been born abroad, which partially explains the widespread feeling of internationalism that pulled Americas to Spain. About one third were Jewish, which is not surprising considering the anti-Semitic overtones of fascism. What is surprising is that about forty-two percent had no prior military experience. It was because of the lack of experience and general unpreparedness of the volunteers that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was originally considered “the chicken shit kids from America complaining all the time,” as one volunteer describes. Nevertheless, the Americans eventually earned themselves a “swell reputation,” said volunteer Carl Geiser, “The Spanish were always very happy to see us coming.” Regardless of their backgrounds, they all found themselves together on the side of the Republic, joining 40,000 other volunteers from fifty-two total countries in the International Brigades.

**Global Dynamics**

The range and variation of the volunteers’ motives cannot be fully understood without examining the background of the economic and political situation in the United States and the shift in social attitudes prior to American entry into the war. In 1936, the effects of the Great Depression were still being strongly felt in the United States as well as in Europe, where fascism was largely embraced as a solution. The widespread unemployment and severe financial hardship bred frustration, anger, protest, discontent, and disillusionment. Labor unions, student action groups, and radical organizations began to spring up demanding better conditions for workers everywhere. Communism, with its emphasis on the unity of workers around the world, gained significant appeal among those disillusioned with capitalism. Communism also appealed to intellectuals with its “Leninist stress on the importance of intellectual workers as the vanguard

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6 Nelson, 208.
of social revolution.”7 The Great Depression was a global phenomenon that spurred a sense of international solidarity among working class citizens around the world, who came together in their common suffering.

With demonstrations in every major city and so many people out of work, former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan suggested, “The structure of capitalist society in its old form had broken down...Perhaps it could not survive at all without radical change...Something like a revolutionary situation had developed.”8 In this era of revolutionary thought, volunteer Bernard Knox mentions, “like many of my generation faced with what seemed to be the collapse of capitalism, I turned to the texts that seemed to offer an explanation of our dilemma—above all, that remarkable document The Communist Manifesto.”9 The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) saw its membership jump from a few thousand in the 1920s to about 90,000 members by 1936, with its overall influence extending much further.

The Spanish popular front government, with its awkward mixture of democratic and communist ideals, was viewed by many of the volunteers as the great hope for society and as an extension of the American dream. Americans began to see themselves as part of the larger, worldwide community, as citizens of the world. As volunteer Milt Wolff said, “You immediately found a whole new world open up to you. You became aware of what was happening.”10 This new sweeping feeling of internationalism stood in contrast to the United States government’s policy of isolationism. With the general American public divided over the

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9 Ibid.

10 *The Good Fight*
Spanish Civil War, the United States maintained its isolationist policy it had re-adopted after World War I. This position bothered many volunteers, including Leonard Levenson, who was angry at people for "...falling into that Utopian idea of American neutrality and isolation." Also like many others, he was worried about the prospect of such a war coming to the United States: "I don't want America in a war—I know what that means. But I know just as surely that the only way out for her is to join the Soviet Union in an active fight for peace." Nevertheless, The United States refused to intervene on one side or the other, passing the Neutrality Act in 1935.

When it was clear the United States government was staying out, intervention became a personal choice. People felt hopeless and helpless watching at home while something much larger than themselves developing in Spain. Volunteer Abe Osheroff had a sense that "something very big was unfolding, and what we were doing was not satisfactory." As one volunteer explained, "If you're part of a big thing, you feel safe; it's only wanting and looking on from the outside that makes one feel nervous and lost." The civil war in Spain was the big thing, an outlet to make the social change Americans felt unable to make at home. It stirred the awakening of romantic and idealistic international sentiment among America workers and especially among American intellectuals. Falcoff explains:

In short, what seemed necessary was an intensified interpretation of those two ingredients of American dualism, collectivism and individualism—a resolving of opposites in harmony so as to produce a sudden surge of national energy. Abandoning faith in gradual progress, American's intellectuals had begun to flirt with

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12 Nelson, 317.

12 The Neutrality Act placed an embargo on all war materials to either side. It severely weakened the Republican side yet did nothing to prevent Germany and Italy from sending arms and supplies to the Nationalist side. It was universally unpopular with the American volunteers who felt betrayed by the government and doomed to failure. However, despite movements in the U.S., the embargo was never lifted.

regeneration mythology, which...has always hinged on the reconciliation of opposites...Spaniards and Americans had both set off in quest of the archetypal utopia in which tensions and strife would be resolved in symbiotic union.\textsuperscript{14}

Just as significant as the shift to socialist and communists ideals was the shift to antifascism. Like the communist party, the fascist party also gained members in the United States. However, most Americans expressed contempt for fascism, which worked to suppress labor unions and radical parties, and recognized the threat of fascism to the American Trade Union Movement. Furthermore, fascism was linked to the expansion of Germany's oppressive Nazi regime across Europe and Italy's imperialistic aggression in its invasion of Ethiopia. In 1935, in an effort to help bring national attention to the Nazi regime, volunteer Bill Bailey, among others, protested against the docking of a German ship flying the swastika flag in an American harbor. Hoping to galvanize American opinion against the Nazi regime, Bailey tore down the swastika flag as the crowd cheered. Communist proponents seized this opportunity to promote antifascist propaganda, instilling the idea that fascism was tyranny, war, the end of freedom and individualism, and the antithesis of human progress itself. They did not have much trouble selling their case. Milt Wolff asserted that fascism and war had become synonymous in the minds of many American, who saw "something like unqualified evil" in fascism and Nazism.\textsuperscript{15}

The use of film, though it was used much more effectively in Europe, only played a negligible role in influencing American opinion towards the war. The controversial film \textit{Blockade} hoped to arouse American support for the Republican cause and made an "overt plea to the world to reverse its policy. Explicit or not there is no doubt where its sympathies lie.

\textsuperscript{14} Falcoff, 31.

\textsuperscript{15} Nelson, 2.
Blockade condemned the Fascists by implication.”\textsuperscript{16} However, while a few other films hinted at support for the Republicans, most tended to support the neutralist non-intervention stance of the United States government. The Angel Wore Red, which portrays the Civil War as a battle between honorable and heroic Christians and barbaric godless communists, is the only American film on the Spanish Civil War that supports the Nationalist side.\textsuperscript{17} Whatever influence it had on American public opinion was minimal as no Americans ever volunteered to fight for the Nationalists. In any case, by 1936, the antifascist shift was complete. “The question then aroused,” said Wolff, “Could it happen here?”\textsuperscript{18} Watching the developments in their own country and abroad with a discerning eye, the volunteers unanimously favored the Second Republic; thus Spain called them.

The Call to Spain

The United States’ neutrality and the restriction of passports, as it is illegal in the United States to enlist in a foreign army, made it somewhat difficult for American volunteers trying to leave the country. To reduce suspicion, they had to pretend they were tourists, students, and archeologists on the boat trip over to Spain. Recruitment for the ALB was done primarily by word of mouth and by advertisements pretending to seek workers for Spain. Once they arrived, they often hid in small towns along the French and Spanish border and crossed Pyrenees Mountains at night. Many were convinced the fight would be relatively short, a historically common misconception at the beginning of wars. Most believed very strongly in their convictions. John Cookson insisted that he volunteered “but for one thing –to follow the bright


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{18} The Good Fight
star of your beliefs to the bitter end, though it be death itself.”

What exactly these beliefs were was often not always clear, even among the volunteers themselves. “None of us really know why [we went],” said volunteer Earl Luppo, only that they had a deep feeling Spain was the “next logical step from our battle on the picket lines.”

Many felt like they had an obligation to fulfill. For some it took a great deal of deliberation. For others, “It seemed like a perfectly natural thing to do,” explained volunteer Ed Balchowsky, “I knew what oppression was. I didn’t need politics; I wanted to go and help.”

With the rebirth of political, social, and global consciousness, the Americans found a wide variety of reasons to join the International Brigades. The prominent underlying themes were antifascism, democracy, communism, and religious and racial freedom.

In American lore, fighting for democracy has become virtually synonymous with heroism and patriotism. America’s forefathers had shed blood for the noble cause of democracy, and every American had a duty to do the same. It is the “deepest American tradition,” claimed volunteer Lou Ornitz, “We went because Spain was the front line in which American democracy was being defended.”

The subsequent oversimplification of all the volunteers as heroic defenders of democracy is a significant contributor to the romanticized myth that developed around the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Moreover, defining democracy can be just as tricky as defining fascism, and in no place was this more difficult than the Spanish Civil War. Subtlety and nuance in terminology has become the subject of much debate and misunderstanding. As

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19 Nelson, 39.


21 The Good Fight

George Orwell maintains: “It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic, we are praising it; consequently, the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning.”23 Unfortunately, the war is often oversimplified and glamorized as a worldwide showdown between fascism and democracy, an idea that has no real meaning.

The Second Republic in Spain is a perfect example of a regime claiming that it is a democracy in order to attract support. While it did espouse some democratic ideals, the reality of the situation was much more complex, with communists, socialists, democrats, and anarchists forced together in an unholy alliance. These many different overlapping and competing political factions on the Republican side affected Salaria Kea O’Reilly, a volunteer nurse. “I was not a political person,” she said, “because you shifted around too much.”24 The CPUSA and the Popular Front tried to cover up communist influence with the theme of defending democracy and fighting fascism.25 However, those passionate about democracy perceived the Republican side as sharing many similar democratic ideals and values as the United States, including popular elections, the separation of church and state, women’s suffrage, equality and individualism. James Lardner reflects the attitudes of many of the volunteers saying simply, “I believe that fascism is wrong and must be exterminated, and that liberal democracy or probably communism is right.”26 However, without help from the “world working class and the democratic governments,” pointed out volunteer Joe Dougher, it will be impossible to stop fascism. Lifting


24 Americans in the Spanish Civil War, part 1.

25 Haynes, 84.

26 Nelson, 45.
the embargo emplaced by the Neutrality Act was, he believed, “the task of every democratic-minded person, and explicitly the task of us with communist understanding...”27

Former General Secretary of the CPUSA Earl Browder once claimed, “Communism is twentieth century Americanism.”28 It wasn’t. Capitalism and materialism still dominate Americanism; communism has never been a popular political platform in the United States. The mixture of communistic and democratic ideals in Spain and the postwar overreaction against communism contributed to the debate over its role in American involvement. As Hank Rubin points out: “The program was so broad that by 1936 much of the presidential platform of the Communist party had been adopted by the Democratic party, and four years later, some of its planks, such as Social Security, were also in the Republican party platform.”29 Of course, the fact that a majority of American volunteers had some communist affiliation was not just a coincidence. Prior to 1936, communism had gained much stronger appeal in the United States, especially among internationalists, those who were more conscious of international affairs and more likely to volunteer to fight in Spain. Many American volunteers recognized that joining the communist party was their best chance for getting to Spain. Some joined the party knowing little to nothing about what it stood for. The communist party in Spain, as the largest and most organized group, was largely responsible for recruiting, organizing, and training the International Brigades. As a result, communism maintained its presence on the surface, with many of its follower’s being no doubt firm believers in its ideology.

27 From the Cradle of Liberty to the Tomb of Fascism.

28 Falcoff, 34.

Allegiance to a particular political party, however, does not adequately explain why a ragtag collection of men, by their own free will, joined together to defend a foreign country. The American volunteer brigades suffered as much as fifty percent killed in action, yet continued to fight until they were withdrawn by the Republican government.\textsuperscript{30} Such devotion to a cause runs much deeper than political doctrine; it is more related to the utopian and abstract ideals of freedom and rebuilding society, as specifically seen in antifascism and internationalism. Political doctrine itself often became vague and abstract. Volunteer Andrew Pape claimed, “I am sure that I express the sentiment of Americans in Spain when I say that we are proud of the progress of the American working class, and its unbending, continuously hammering leader—the communist party.”\textsuperscript{31} He went on to add, “There is more than one front for democracy in the world today and America is in the forefront of many of them.”\textsuperscript{32} This blurry distinction between communism and democracy characterized the political affiliations and loyalties among many American volunteers.

Communism was associated with intense feelings of camaraderie among the Spanish and international volunteers who felt like, as Salaria Kea O’Reilly describes, “a close-knit family.”\textsuperscript{33} However, for many Americans, that’s about as far as communism went. “Modern Spain, the country I was planning on fighting for, had changed,” said Hank Rubin, “Neither communist nor socialist, it was a country in transition that stood in the center of the fight against fascism.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} The Spanish Republican Government withdrew the International Brigades in 1938 hoping to pressure Germany and Italy to remove their own troops, which were much more effective. The strategy failed as Germany and Italy kept their troops in Spain, helping the Nationalists eventually win the war the following year.

\textsuperscript{31} From the Cradle of Liberty to the Tomb of Fascism.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} The Good Fight

\textsuperscript{34} Rubin, 19.
The establishment of a communist government in Spain was not a priority; it was simply viewed "as an appropriate system for achieving development in retarded countries."\(^{35}\) Communism was more or less a means to an end, that being ultimately the defeat of fascism.

Communism, with its emphasis on equality, also influenced motives of many African Americans to serve in Spanish Civil War. However, as it was with most volunteers, black volunteers were not fighting for communism, but using it as a tool to fight against fascism. In America in the late 1930s, racial inequality was rampant, and its African-American citizens were often treated as second class citizens. As Peter Carroll explains:

> Without exception, the African Americans who served in the Lincoln Brigade could testify to the double burden of economic hardship and racial injustice. But unlike most blacks, they had found in the Communist movement an opportunity to forge an alliance with sympathetic whites against a common enemy. Determined to prove the priority of class over race, the Communists party welcomed disaffected blacks and strove to eliminate every vestige of discrimination.\(^{36}\)

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was the first fully racially integrated American military force, and it would eventually be commanded by Oliver Law, the first black commander of such a unit. Many black volunteers, whether communist or not, saw in Spain the opportunity to be treated as equals, while actively fighting against the racial oppression represented by fascism. Unable to fight for freedom in the United States, volunteer M. H. Wickman wrote, "Tell the Negro people that their side of freedom is with the Spanish antifascists."\(^{37}\)

Hitler openly preached white supremacy, and his growing power in Europe was seen as a threat to black America. The Klu Klux Klan movement was seen as a small scale version of

\(^{35}\) Falcoff, 22.


\(^{37}\) *From the Cradle of Liberty to the Tomb of Fascism.*
what would happen if fascism spread to and took control in the United States. Volunteer Ed Johnson explains that he fought in the ALB to protect democracy and to fight against white oppression, recalling what Mussolini had done to "brothers in Ethiopia." Likewise, volunteer Canute Frankson writes that he was fighting for "the preservation of democracy... in one of the most bitter struggles of human history, there is no color line, no discrimination, no race hatred. There's only one hate, and that is the hate for fascism." He echoes the rhetoric of other volunteers in his belief that the spread of fascism must be stopped in Europe in order to save America, as well as belief in the widespread utopian visions of the chance to build "a new society - a society of peace and plenty." 

Just as many black volunteers saw fascism as being racially oppressive, many Jewish and Catholic volunteers saw fascism as being religiously oppressive. The fight against religious oppression contributed substantially to American voluntarism, as partially evidenced by the disproportionate percentage of Jews in the ALB. As Hyman Katz believed, "They are trying to set up the same anti-progressive, anti-Semitic regime in Spain, as they have in Italy and Germany...it won't be long before they get to America." He did not feel he could stand idly by and do nothing, as he wrote in a letter home, "Don't you realize that we Jews will be the first to suffer if fascism comes?" Volunteer Wilfred Mendelson also saw a threat in fascism and considered the Spanish Civil War as yet another battle in the ongoing struggle against Jewish oppression: "Spain is perhaps a fit arena for this struggle. Here it was that the Medieval Inquisition drove the Jews from their homes and livelihoods. Today Jews are returning

38 *Abraham Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War.*

39 Nelson, 34.

40 Ibid., 31.
welcomed by the entire Spanish people to fight the modern Inquisition.\textsuperscript{41} Like many African-Americans, Jews feared what seemed inevitable if the fascists were victorious in Spain: the establishment of a Nazi-like regime and Jewish persecution.

Like the Jews, Catholics decided to take up arms against Franco's regime, which may seem odd at first given that the Catholic Church had sided with the Nationalists in Spain. However, the opposition to Franco's regime amongst American Catholic volunteers was tied to the freedom of religion, a basic tenet of American democracy. The international conscience volunteers saw fascism as the corruption of Catholicism and a threat to the freedom of their faith. Among the American public, on the other hand, Catholics were generally divided over the issue, and many feared being charged with heresy if they were found to support the loyalists. As Falcoff says, "Although American Catholics might side with the Republic, they dared not, with a few exceptions, do so publicly...in a way, their willingness to cast their private sympathies with the Republic can be seen as the first glimmering of the dawn of American Catholicism's voluntarism."\textsuperscript{42}

Salaria Kea O'Reilly, who saw Franco's regime as oppressive, believed she was "doing Christ's duty"\textsuperscript{43} by volunteering as a nurse in Spain. Maurice Conway, a Catholic volunteer, fought for the loyalists because he believed Franco was not truly defending Catholicism or religious freedom. As Volunteer Lou Ornitz pointed out, "If it is a crime to be a Catholic in Nazi Germany, how could Nazi Germany be defending Catholicism in Spain?"\textsuperscript{44} Like American

\textsuperscript{41} Nelson, 40.  
\textsuperscript{42} Falcoff, 22.  
\textsuperscript{43} The Good Fight  
\textsuperscript{44} Abraham Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War
Catholics, there was a divide among Spanish Catholics as well. William Sennett notes, “Yes, priests who fought with the fascists murderers are treated as enemies of the people, but you must also remember that there are many priests who have remained loyal (I have seen them) and are fighting with gun in hand against those who betrayed the faith.”\(^{45}\) It would become clear later on in the war that there was religious persecution on both sides.

Underlying the all the rhetoric of fighting against religious and racial oppression, fighting for communism, and defending democracy, was the common theme of antifascism, which stemmed from the development of internationalism among American volunteers. As volunteer Theodore Veltfort states, “When it became that Spain was the scene of a Fascist invasion, antifascists from all over the world asked to help overthrow the one present menace to world peace.”\(^{46}\) The contempt for fascism only grew deeper as the war dragged on, as volunteer Harry Meloff made clear in a letter home: “I hate you fascists, for you are responsible for this war...for blood and destruction and the return of barbarism. I hate you with the most intense fever possible.”\(^{47}\) Despite the volunteer’s passionate convictions and warnings, the United States maintained its natural stance for the duration of the war. In 1941, the United States would finally enter the struggle against fascism in World War II, where most of the ALB volunteers would fight fascism for a second time.

Conclusion

Ignored by textbooks, and overshadowed by World War II, where most of the volunteers fought fascism a second time, the story of the “premature antifascists” of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade has remained largely unknown to the general public. Many veterans were distrusted by

\(^{45}\) Nelson, 319.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 309.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 200.
the U.S. army; they were harassed, spied upon, and initially prevented from seeing combat because of their perceived political convictions. Because of fear and suspicions of communism in America, which intensified in 1950s during Red Scare, many veteran volunteers found it hard to hold a job and many were blacklisted; the FBI would hound them, sometimes kicking them out of their homes. The volunteers had risked losing their citizenship trying to get to Spain, suffered some of the highest casualty rates of any American unit, and returned to the United States only to be harassed by their own government and people.

The American volunteers reflected the changing attitudes and beliefs of a complicated era. Whether they fought against fascism, for democracy, for communism, or for religious, racial, or political freedom, beneath all their motives were the primary perceptions of internationalism and antifascism. They were the first American military unit to be fully integrated, they were the first Americans to fight against fascism, and the first to be disowned by their country as a result. In 1996, Spain gave honorary citizenship to the surviving members of the International Brigades. Understanding why they fought, why they left the United States for Spain gives us insight into the driving forces of the human condition. “They gave up everything…and they came and said to us: ‘We are here. Your cause, Spain's cause, is ours,’” Dolores Ibárruri declared of the American volunteers as they left Spain in 1938: “You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend.”

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