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The Abraham Lincoln Brigade

of the Spanish Civil War

Sam Sills

2007

During the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), 2,800 American volunteers took up arms to defend the Spanish Republic against a military rebellion led by General Franco and aided by Hitler and Mussolini. To the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which fought from 1937 through 1938, the defense of the Republic represented the last hope of stopping the spread of international fascism. The Lincolns fought alongside approximately 35,000 anti-fascists from fifty-two countries who, like themselves, were organized under the aegis of the Comintern, and who also sought to “make Madrid the tomb of fascism.” In keeping with Popular Front culture, the Americans named their units the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the George Washington Battalion, and the John Brown Battery. Together with the British, Irish, Canadian, and other nationals they formed the Fifteenth International Brigade. (“Lincoln Brigade” is a misnomer originating with an American support organization, Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.) One hundred twenty-five American men and women also served with the American Medical Bureau as nurses, doctors, technicians, and ambulance drivers.

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The conviction that made volunteering for a war against fascism possible was born from the economic calamity and political turmoil of the 1930s. Like many during the Great Depression, the young volunteers had an experience of deprivation and injustice that led them to join the burgeoning student, unemployed, union, and cultural movements that were influenced by the Communist Party (CP) and other Left organizations. Involvement in these groups exposed them to a Marxist and internationalist perspective and, with their successes in galvanizing people to conscious, political action, gave rise to a revolutionary élan.

American radicalism was spurred by the appearance of profascist groups like the Liberty League, and the expansion of fascism abroad. With Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Hitler's ascendance in 1933, and Italy's assault on Ethiopia in 1934—all accomplished without hindrance from the governments of the West—the CP responded with the coalition-building strategy of the Popular Front, attracting thousands of aroused citizens directly into its ranks or into “front” organizations. When four right-wing Spanish generals, with German and Italian support, attacked the legally elected government on July 19, 1936, a desire to confront fascism in Spain swept through the progressive communities in Europe and the Americas. Within weeks, militant German, French, and Italian anti-fascists were fighting in Madrid. By January 1937, despite a State Department prohibition against travel to Spain, Americans were crossing the Pyrenees.

The Lincolns came from all walks of life, all regions of the country, and included seamen, students, the unemployed, miners, fur workers, lumberjacks, teachers, salesmen, athletes, dancers, and artists. They established the first racially integrated military unit in U.S. history and were the first to be led by a black commander. At least 60 percent were members of the Young Communist League or CP. “Wobblies” (members of the Industrial Workers of the World or “IWW”), socialists, and the unaffiliated also joined. The Social-

ists formed their own [Eugene] Debs Column for Spain, but open recruitment brought on government suppression.

The reaction of Western governments to the war was ambivalent and duplicitous. They agreed to a nonintervention pact and the United States embargoed aid to the Spanish belligerents, policies intended to de-escalate the war but whose selective enforcement undermined the Republic. While Germany and Italy supplied Franco with troops, tanks, submarines, and a modernized air force (the first to bomb open cities, most notably Guernica), the nonintervention policy only prevented arms from reaching the Republic. General Motors, Texaco, and other American corporations further assisted Franco with trucks and fuel. The Soviet Union and Mexico were the only governments to sell armaments to the Republic, although much of them were impounded at the French border. Throughout the war, a vociferous political and cultural movement in America rallied to the Republic by raising money for medical aid and demanding an end to the embargo. Such participants as Albert Einstein, Dorothy Parker, Gene Kelly, Paul Robeson, Helen Keller, A. Philip Randolph, and Gypsy Rose Lee reflected the wide base of support for the Republican cause.

Self-motivated and ideological, the Lincolns attempted to create an egalitarian “people’s army”; officers were distinguished only by small bars on their berets and in some cases rank-and-file soldiers elected their own officers. Traditional military protocol was shunned, although not always successfully. A political commissar explained the politics of the war to the volunteers and tended to their needs and morale. The Lincoln Brigade helped ease the pressure on Madrid, giving the Republic time to train and organize its own popular army. The subject of respectful news reports by such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Herbert Matthews, Martha Gellhorn, and Lillian Hellman, the brigade helped strengthen anti-fascist opinion in the United States. Yet the Lincolns and the Republican military, fighting with inadequate weaponry, could not withstand the forces allied against them. By the end, the

Lincolns had lost nearly 750 men and sustained a casualty rate higher than that suffered by Americans in World War II. Few escaped injury. In November 1938, as a last attempt to pressure Hitler and Mussolini into repatriating their troops, Spanish prime minister Juan Negrin ordered the withdrawal of the International Brigades. The Axis coalition refused to follow suit and Madrid fell in March 1939.

The Lincolns returned home as heroes of the anti-fascist cause but enjoyed no official recognition of their deed. Many Lincolns soon aroused bitterness within sectors of the Left when, with the signing of the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact in 1939, they supported the CP's call for the United States to stay out of WWII. Once the United States and the Soviet Union entered the war, however, many of the veterans enlisted in the armed forces or served with the merchant marine. In a foreshadowing of the McCarthy period, the armed forces designated the Lincolns "premature antifascists" and confined them to their bases. Many successfully protested and were allowed to see action. Among the core agents of the Office of Strategic Services were Lincoln veterans whose contacts with the European partisans, forged in Spain, were key to OSS missions.

In the 1950s most veterans, whether Communist or not, were harassed or forced out of their jobs by the FBI. Communist Lincolns in particular were hit hard by the repressive Subversive Activities Control Board, the Smith Act, and state sedition laws, although over time all but a few convictions were overturned. In the 1950s and 1960s the majority of Lincoln veterans quit the CP but continued to be active on the Left. Notwithstanding its exclusion from American textbooks, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade commands attention as a unique example of prescient, radical, and selfless action in the cause of international freedom.