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ENG 102

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14 November 2007

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade

In the month of July in 1936, three Spanish generals lead a revolt against the democratically elected republic government. According to the book, “The Abram Lincoln Brigade” by Arthur H. Landis, the generals Franco, Mola and Sanjurjo, with the help of the triumvirate of Monarchists, Fascist Falange and the Catholic C.E.D.A. (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas) planned and executed this rebellion (xi). The revolt started in the protectorate of Morocco in the city of Melilla and spread out over entire Spanish territory. The rebels, or Nationalists, shared the same fascist ideas as Adolph Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy. The fascist revolt in Spain was the perfect opportunity for Germany and Italy to create a bond and spread fascism throughout Europe. The Rome-Madrid-Berlin axis was thus created. The army of the Nationalists was formed by many groups including the Spanish Foreign Legion, the Army of Africa, about 100,000 Italian soldiers, the Regular Army of Portugal, and the Nazi-German army. The German army also offered services including an air force known as the “Condor Legion”, tanks, artillery and technicians (Landis xi). This well prepared army fought against a relatively unarmed group of regular civilian people for two and half years. The Republican army was formed by people with professions such as teachers, journalists and even artists, without any military experience whatsoever. The fear of a victory of fascism in Spain was the main reason why people from different countries decided to volunteer to fight against the rebel army of the Nationalists. These foreigners created what was called the “International

Brigades.” Author Verle B. Johnston writes in his book “Legions of Babel” that the number of these International Brigades was five, and they consisted of about 40,000 volunteers from 52 countries. The first international brigade was created October 22 in 1938, and was called the Thaelmann Brigade. This brigade was formed mostly by anti-Nazi Germans. Another brigade was called the Garibaldi brigade and its volunteers were originally from Italy. The third international brigade to be created was originally from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe; they called themselves Dombrowski Brigade. The next brigade was French and Belgian. The last brigade was English speaking (Johnston 46). The battalions that comprised the English speaking brigade included the Canadian battalion also known as the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion, the British battalion under the name of Saklatvala Battalion, and the Abraham Lincoln battalion composed of volunteers from the United States of America. This latter battalion was referred to as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade because instead of being formed only by soldiers, the battalion also included medical aid and transport personnel such as pilots, making this group more like a full fledged brigade (Landis xvii). According to Clarence Kailyn, one of the survivors of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, in his interview with Amy Goodman for the documentary “Into the Fire: American Women and Men in the Spanish Civil War,” the brigade was named after the great leader and one of the best presidents that United States ever had, Abraham Lincoln (Goodman 6) .

This research paper will focus on the Abraham Lincoln brigade and their volunteers. As mentioned before, the main reason these volunteers got involved in a foreign war was the fear of the victory of fascism. Some characteristics of the fascist political movement can be found in the article, “What is fascism? Some General Ideological Features” by Matthew N. Lyons. The author explains that fascism is against political pluralism and liberalism. He also states that the fascist

political movement was based on ideas of white male supremacy (Lyons 1). Another definition of fascism according to Moe Fishman, ex-volunteer in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, is that fascism involves more than the often associated racist ideology; fascism negates everything that defines democracy (Goodman 10). Fighting against these values was the reason for volunteering in the Spanish Civil War. What is most impressive about these volunteers was their motivation. Their political values were more important than money. There was no profit or monetary compensation for these volunteers. Even worse, these volunteers were not recognized by the United States government as war veterans after they returned home. Thus, politics played a role not only in the volunteers' motivation to join the brigade, but also in their rejection upon return home.

The assassination of Jose Calvo Sotelo was the instigating factor in the fascist insurrection against the Republic and the start of the Spanish Civil War. According to Johnston, Jose Calvo Sotelo was a member of the political party called Renovación Española. This political group shared fascist ideas with Hitler and Mussolini and they were the most critical opposing party to the Republic government. Immediately prior to the assassination of Jose Calvo Sotelo, members of the military group, Falange Española, assassinated a member of the Assault Guard of the Republic. In revenge, a group of members of the Assault Guard killed Jose Calvo Sotelo (Johnston 19). The followers of Sotelo, mostly military people, decided to revolt against the Republic government. Days after this military coup, the Spanish Civil War started. The help provided by Germany and Italy together with the possession of almost all the armament by the Nationalist side, made possible an easy initial victory of fascism against the democratically elected government of Spain. This fascist menace and the decision of the U.S. government not to intervene in the conflict, was the reason why a group of Americans decided to help the Republic

against the fascist threat. According to Sam Sills' online article, "The Abraham Lincoln Brigade," the main reason why these brave Americans decided to volunteer to fight against fascism was the economical disaster and political disillusionment that young people experienced in the United States. He describes the situation of young people during the Great Depression during the 30's and how this motivated these young people to help another country facing destruction. Many of these volunteers were influenced by the communist cultural movement that was sweeping the United States' unemployed and union workers. About 60% of the volunteers were members of the communist party. Most volunteers were not military trained. In fact, they had other professions such as artists, teachers or salesmen (Sills 1).

The American government was reluctant provide the Republic with military aid (Sills 2). In the book "American Neutrality and the Spanish Civil War," author Allen Guttman writes that the United States government passed a resolution in 1937, known as the Pittman Resolution or the Neutrality Act, stating that the United States would not provide any aid in the form of arms, ammunition or other war materials to countries engaged in civil wars (45). On the other hand, according to Denis Brasket in the article "The Forgotten Heroes of a Greater Generation," some American corporations such as General Motors and Texaco bypassed this resolution and provided trucks and oil to the fascists led by General Franco (Brasket 12). According to Landis more than 1,866,000 metric tons of gas were delivered to the Nationalist by Texaco during the course of the Spanish Civil War. Twelve thousand vehicles were shipped to Spain to be delivered to Franco's army from Ford, Studebaker, and General Motors. Landis states that neither American gas nor vehicles were presented to the Republican Government (94). Only the Soviet Union and Mexico sold weapons directly to the Spanish Republic (Sills 2). American travel to Spain was also prohibited. In Amy Goodman's interview, veteran of the Abraham

Lincoln Brigade, Clarence Kailin stated that passports were stamped with the words “not valid for travel in Spain” at the time (5). The State Department could not guarantee the security of the traveler in a country under revolution or war. Additionally, since there was no tourist purpose to travel to Spain during the war, the passport was revoked for use in travel to Spain. Landis writes that all those who defied this prohibition on travel to Spain would be added to the State Department’s black list (15). According to Brasket, despite the prohibition of the U.S. government against American travel to Spain, between December of 1936 and September of 1938, about 2,900 Americans disobeyed this command. The volunteers crossed the Portuguese and French borders to arrive in Spain to fight against the Nationalists. Once in Spain, they formed three different battalions, the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the John Brown Battery and the George Washington Battalion but they took the collective name The Abraham Lincoln Brigade (Brasket 12).

One of the main characteristics of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was that it was an integrated unit. According to Landis, the Lincoln Brigade was fighting against fascism and one of the main characteristics of this political movement was white male supremacy. The volunteers of the Lincoln Brigade were against any ideas of racial superiority, and decided that no racial hierarchy would exist within the brigade (73). In fact, Landis writes that the number of African Americans that belonged to the Lincoln Brigade was ten. One of the African American volunteers, Oliver Law, was the first African American to command a unit with white American soldiers (73).

There were seven battles fought by these members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Landis states that approximately 1,600 American volunteers died during their participation in these seven battles in the Spanish Civil War (xviii). One of the most important and bloodiest

battles was the battle of Jarama in 1938. According to Johnston, the Nationalists unleashed a strike to take Madrid and end the war. In order to stop this attack, the Republicans sent four brigades to support the regular Republican army. The battle took place next to the river Jarama and lasted from February 6 to February the 28th with the momentary victory of the Republicans (Johnston 68). More than twenty thousand men from both sides died during the Jarama Battle. Table 1 shows the number of pre-battle international volunteers that participated during this battle, and the number of casualties as a result of the battle. Out of the 500 Lincoln Brigade volunteers who participated in this battle, 350 died on the battlefield. More than half of the international brigade volunteers involved in the battle at Jarama were casualties as a result of this battle. See Table 1.

Table 1

International Brigade volunteers and casualties before and after the Jarama Battle.

	Pre-Battle Volunteers	Casualties
XI Brigade	1,500	1,200
Thälmann	500	450
Edgar André	500	300
Commune de Paris	500	450
XII Brigade	3,000	1,700
Garibaldi	1,000	500
Dombrowsky	1,000	600
André Marty	1,000	600
XV Brigade	2,700	2,250
British	600	500
Dimitrov	800	700
6 th February	800	700
Lincoln	500	350
XVI Brigade	<u>1,500</u>	<u>400</u>
Total	8,700	5,550

Source: Johnston, Verle B. Legions of Babel. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania UP, 1967.

In addition to the battles waged, the Lincoln Brigade volunteers used other methods of warfare. In the article “Lincoln Brigade Fought Franco with Arms and with Art,” author Jerry Tallmer says they also used other more peaceful methods of warfare including art, such as painting, newspaper articles, and poetry. The writer adds fragments of poems written by brigade members as examples, such as the following lines of poetry, “Now I understood why we must win. Men die but their blood fights on in other veins and their purpose fill other hearts.” (Tallmer 2). Another good example of these methods of fighting against fascism was the newspaper articles written by Ernest Hemingway, who was not a member himself but instead a strong supporter of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and its cause. According to Kelley Dupuis, in his article “Dubious Battles: Ernest Hemingway’s Journeys to War,” Ernest Hemingway visited Spain three times during the years of the civil war as a journalist for the North American Newspaper Alliance. He reported on the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, narrated from the Republican side (Dupuis 3). He followed a group of Republican soldiers in their missions and battles and wrote in one of his articles, “The Spanish people will rise again as they have always risen before against tyranny” (Fried 312).

Although Hemingway sided with the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, according to Dupuis, Hemingway also described the atrocities committed by the Republicans during the war conflict. During his travels with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade volunteers as a journalist, Ernest Hemingway was witness to some unjustified murders committed by communist and anarchist supporters of the Republic. In his book, “For Whom the Bells Tolls,” Ernest Hemingway narrated the war crimes and criminal actions committed by Andre Marty, the real life commander of the International Brigades. Because of the publication of this book in 1940, Ernest Hemingway gained some enemies among leftist ideologists, in particular for also

portraying some fascists as victims (Dupuis 3). Despite this criticism, Hemingway should be applauded for his neutrality in portraying the negative aspects of both sides of the conflict, even though his political ideologies were more aligned with those of the Spanish Republicans.

Despite the help provided by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade both on and off battlefield, in November of 1938, the Prime Minister of Spain Juan Negrin ordered the withdrawal of the Lincoln and other international brigades from Spain. In his book, Landis discusses the speech that the Prime Minister Negrin gave in front of the League of Nations which explained the reasons for the international brigade withdrawal. The speech states that in order to avoid a world war conflict, the international help from foreign countries must end. Negrin hoped that the Spanish conflict could be resolved by the Spaniards, without any foreign help (Landis 577). While Negrin stressed his appreciation for the help the international brigades had provided, he requested the withdrawal of all foreign help. Thus, the remaining international brigade volunteers began their journey home. However, the fascist supporting German and Italian troops continued to fight in Spain.

More than a third of the Lincoln Brigade volunteers died in combat while in Spain and for the luckier ones that did return home, another war was waiting at home. The government of United States did not recognize the members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as veterans of war. The reason for this maltreatment was due to the Lincoln Brigade's ties to Soviet backed communist organizations. According to Brasket, the surviving veterans were denied Veteran Administration medical care and the G.I. Bill (12). The veterans were hunted down by the Subversive Activities Control Board and U.S. Justice Department during the 1950s and 1960s (Sills 2). Abraham Lincoln Brigade veteran Moe Fishman tells in his interview with Amy Goodman that the F.B.I referred to the veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as "premature

anti –fascists,” and indicates that this term was used in a derogatory manner. Fishman explains that this term means that the members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade understood the concept and threat of fascism before it was known by the rest of Americans. For many Americans, the fight against fascism started after the attack on Pearl Harbor, at the time of the United States entry into World War II. Some Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans believe that placing the World War II as the beginning of the fascist threat is a way to ignore and thus avoid the theory that the policy of non-intervention of United States in the Spanish Civil war was a mistake. Fascists won the war in Spain, perhaps in part due to lack of United States opposition (Goodman 8). The American government propaganda against the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was pervasive, and was largely fueled by anti-communist sentiments related to the communist ties of the brigade members and the Republican side, as well as possible American embarrassment over not helping fight fascism prior to the start of World War II.

Another example of the harassment the volunteers suffered upon their return home is described by Sam Verhovek in the New York Times article, “Seattle Journal: 60 Years after Spain, Lincoln Brigade is Honored.” Verhovek tells the history of a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who was harassed by members of the F.B.I. These agents showed up where he worked and warned his boss, “Do you know that this man is a communist?” To this, his boss answered, “Do you know where I can find more like those? This guy does great work” (Verhovek 2). Other veterans were punished by being denied the right to be federal employees and they were black-listed for the rest of their lives (Brasket 12).

After 60 years of lack of recognition, the members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were honored in Seattle. Verhovek describes the monument erected in Seattle in 1998 in honor of the veterans of the Lincoln Brigade. This monument is located on the campus of the University of

Washington. The author describes that the monument was the result of the efforts of two members of the Lincoln Brigade that live in Seattle and a professor of Spanish and Portuguese. Verhovek reports that some members of the Lincoln Brigade criticize the U.S. Government for not recognizing their fight against fascism. In contrast, in other countries such as in Spain, the government made the members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade honorary citizens of Spain. This article also mentions that many memorials are displayed all over Europe in honor of this brigade. Despite all the mistreatment in the United States, Verhovek says that the remaining Lincoln Brigade members are very happy that finally their effort against fascism is recognized by this monument in Seattle (2).

The second and only other American monument dedicated to the volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade is located on the San Francisco Waterfront. Dan Hodapp, chair member of the Port of San Francisco writes in the agenda item No. 2 of the 2006 meeting minutes of the Port of San Francisco that many volunteers that fought in the Spanish Civil War against fascism were workers of the San Francisco waterfront and this monument is dedicated to those who served in Spain (Hodapp 2).

The United States government should have helped and recognized those veterans as heroes immediately after the Spanish Civil War, rather than waiting over 60 years. These volunteers participated in a war in a foreign country without the support of their homeland, and with the only incentive being freedom from fascism. This type of volunteerism based on political ideals is completely different from how people decide to fight for freedom in the present day. The best example of current motivation to get involved in wars is the army group called "Black Water." The Black Water group is involved in a mission in Iraq to help free the Iraqi people from the tyranny of a sectarian war that is destroying their country. This military group is

fighting for freedom as a for-profit organization. They are employees, not volunteers for freedom. The members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were motivated by political values which included the right of freedom from fascist rule. Clarence Kailin states in his interview with Amy Goodman that the volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were in Spain not for adventure or money, but instead were there to fight against the fascism of Italy and the Nazism of Germany that was invading Spain with the help of the Nationalists (Goodman 4).

Contrary to the current Iraq war, the United States government decided not to get involved in the Spanish Civil War. Even knowing that fascist countries such as Germany and Italy were aiding the rebels Nationalist, United States took a neutral position. As mentioned earlier, one of the possible reasons that the American governments refused to intervene in the Spanish Civil War was the communist ideologies involved and Russian support of the anti-fascist movement of the Republic. However, Germany and Italy supported the nationalists based on the common fascist beliefs. The help provided by these two countries made General Franco's victory possible in March of 1939.

The American reluctance to join the war, combined with Germany and Italy's support of the fascist rebels, was likely the reason for the victory of fascism in Spain. An important historical consequence of this victory in Spain was Hitler's decision to invade Poland, which caused the beginning of World War II. According to Brasket, Franco's victory provided Hitler the confidence needed to invade Poland. Hitler was very satisfied with the role that Germany represented in the Spanish Civil War. Hitler saw that his newly developed Nazi weapons and planes that were used against the Republic army led to an efficient victory in Spain. Therefore, Hitler thought that fascist Germany was ready to invade all of Europe (Brasket 12). The course of World War II could have been different if the government of the United States would have

decided to intervene in the Spanish conflict. Perhaps a Republican victory in Spain could have lowered Hitler's expectation of spreading fascism over Europe. Maybe World War II could have even been avoided.

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade is a good example of how politics are involved in deciding the course of history. Countries decide to intervene in war conflicts depending on their own political points of view. As mentioned before, the United States government refused to get involved in the war and as a result of their lack of aid, the Nationalist and their fascism ideas won. On the other hand, the volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln brigade decided to participate in the Spanish Civil War because they knew that fascism was the antithesis of freedom. They fought for what they believed, even though they disagreed with their government and thus suffered political alienation upon return to America. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade volunteers' commitment to fighting for freedom was admirable and deserved better recognition from their government upon return home.

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