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# Disillusionment Versus Loyalty in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, 1937-1938

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History Thesis

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# Disillusionment Versus Loyalty in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, 1937-1938

Charles Rehberger III

May 2015

History

Abstract

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade is the unit of American volunteers fighting within the International Brigades and on the side of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. Analysis of the Brigade and their role in Spain has led to greatly diverging views on why their service ended in defeat and who was to blame for it. While revisionist historians such as Ronald Radosh and Cecil Eby conclude that the Soviet Union was at fault for imposing political pressure on the Republic, sending incompetent officers to command the International Brigades, and using the volunteers to stall as they bled Spain's gold reserve dry, the veterans predominantly reach a different conclusion. The Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade claim that the US and the other western democracies were at fault for failing to aid Spain at all and potentially stopping Fascism's military advancements years before World War II even began. Both sides present convincing evidence, the revisionists presenting declassified documents, the veterans presenting first-hand accounts, but they present the fullest picture together, balancing out the biases inherent in the 1930s as well as the modern biases the revisionists hold today.

## Introduction

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was the American unit in the International Brigades, a military force of leftist volunteers backed by the Soviet Union, during the Spanish Civil War. They fought on behalf of the Spanish Republic against General Francisco Franco's Fascist uprising. Their aid was especially meaningful as the Republic's only other significant ally was the Soviet Union and their aid was more than offset by the massive military backing offered to the Fascists by Hitler and Mussolini. Though they received little training and a fraction of the equipment and support their enemies would receive, the Lincoln Brigade would fight in the International Brigades from 1937 until 1938. In the end, the Soviet and International Brigade support was not enough to assist the Republic in holding back the Fascists and the soldiers of the Lincoln Brigade, like all of the Republic's allies, were sent home in 1938 in hopes the Fascists would do the same.

## Thesis Statement

In the wake of the Lincoln Brigade's service in the war, there have been widely differing views on the nature of the International Brigades and what powers are truly at fault for their defeat. Revisionist historians assert that the Soviets betrayed the Lincoln Brigade through incompetence and going into the war for cynical financial reasons rather than ideological ones while the veterans, in spite of such an accusation, remain widely loyal to their cause, placing the blame on the

western democracies that failed to intervene. Both of these opinions merit consideration and were formed via the extremely different circumstances and access to information that both the revisionists and the Lincoln Brigade veterans possessed, just as they were colored by the politics of the times they were formed in.

### Conclusions of the Lincoln Brigade and International Brigade Historians

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade has been a topic of much historical discussion. Historians, such as Ronald Radosh and Cecil Eby, have examined the Lincoln Brigade's time in Spain, and have come to the conclusion that there was one singular cause of their defeat. The Soviet Union's mismanagement and partisan politics carried on through the International Brigades resulted in corruption, incompetence, and a horrifying loss of life. The revisionists, looking back, see glaring flaws in Soviet strategy and place the blame squarely on their shoulders. They go on to state that the volunteers were idealists who were tricked into serving under a foreign power. These historians of the Lincoln Brigade have asserted that there were ample reasons that the volunteers should have felt disillusionment. They did so by criticizing the International Brigades' involvement in Spain, the circumstances surrounding their training and deployment, and their disastrous experiences in combat.

Radosh and Eby maintain that the Soviets betrayed the members of the Lincoln Brigade by wasting their lives in uncoordinated, disastrous attacks and by using them as a distraction to fleece Spain out of its gold. While this is a widely accepted point of view among modern revisionist historians, it was not a view held

by the majority of Lincolns after their service ended. Though some among them were of different ideologies like Anarchism and Trotskyism, eighty percent were Communists<sup>1</sup> and many of them were loyal Communists even after the war, keeping faith in the cause of the fight against Fascism and blaming the western democracies for failing to intervene on the side of the Republic. The Soviets, through the International Brigades, had presented these idealists with an opportunity that the West had been too cowardly to offer.<sup>2</sup> Despite the heavy casualties, the majority of volunteers, even after the war, believed in their cause as one that was both noble and sincere. The faith they held despite the hardships they experienced in Spain is evident in the numerous efforts of social activism in which they participated after the war. This is most notable in their protests against the Vietnam War and raising relief money for leftist governments in Central America.<sup>3</sup> It becomes clear upon reading their accounts and understanding their postwar lives that the Lincolns were not nearly as disillusioned as the accounts of the revisionist historians would lead one to believe.

These differences in interpretation spring from two very different groups of individuals, each with a distinct ideology. In this paper, I examine why such a disparity exists between revisionist historians that assert that the Lincolns should blame the Soviets for the devastation they suffered, and the volunteers who strongly disagree with Eby and Radosh's reading of the events. While the revisionists assert that the Lincoln Brigade was betrayed and neglected during the course of their service, the veterans remain secure in having fought for a just cause. The veterans of the Lincoln Brigade continued to believe in their cause for years after the war

ended, maintaining that their cause had been a just one that happened to fail and that the war had been a matter of ideals on all levels and not cynicism as these historians assert.

### Argument of the Revisionists

The revisionists maintain that though the volunteers had good intentions, their efforts were hampered by a command structure that was at best incompetent and at worst betraying their trust to gain a political hegemony in Spain. Many commanders of the Soviet-controlled International Brigades were of poor skill and only present because of their political obedience, including Janos "Gal" Galicz, Colonel Vladimir Copic,<sup>4</sup> and French revolutionary Andre Marty.<sup>5</sup> General Gal was a man of humble beginnings who rose through the ranks of the party only to find that when he achieved the heights the bourgeoisie had once looked down and spat at him from, he would succumb to the same sense of superiority and abuses of power.<sup>6</sup> Colonel Copic was not much better. Though he would meet the men of the Lincoln Battalion at the front, it was for either of two occasions. He would appear during a lull in the fighting to share in any festivities the Lincolns would engage in with the locals that they always seemed to befriend. Alternatively, he would appear before a battle, to promise the Lincolns a massive measure of troop, armored, or artillery support, only to disappear once it became clear that the backup would never arrive. He would also vastly undersell the enemy forces' combat capabilities to get the men more willing to attack.<sup>7</sup>

Andre Marty, was a prominent Communist figure, famous for leading a rebellion on a French submarine during the first World War, though power would soften and distort his ideals<sup>8</sup> to the point he expected sheer reverence from the men of the International Brigades. He would lord over the Brigades' headquarters at Albacete for the duration of the war, obstructing aid to the Lincolns, as he personally despised Americans, and walking about a base filled with his favorite soldiers whom he spared the horrors of the front at the Lincolns' expense. The Lincolns realized this as early as 1937, as reflected in an anonymous, confidential note sent to the International Brigades command: "Tactical Deployment? When it comes to leave, the International Brigades are treated like no Spanish Brigade... For lesser units, seven consecutive months (at the front)."<sup>9</sup> Further exploration of the Soviet fixation on politically agreeable leadership among the Republican military is evident in Radosh's collection of wartime documents.<sup>10</sup> This document lists Spanish military officers by their political affiliation and command performance, with an overwhelmingly positive correlation between those amiable to Stalin and those given positive performance reviews.

This disloyalty to the commitment against the Fascists and mistrust of the Republic's allies would be repeated in Soviet and International Brigade dealings with the soldiers of the Lincoln Brigade. The Lincolns had volunteered for an unspecified duration of service, and the International Brigades readily took advantage of this fact, taking the volunteers' passports for 'safekeeping'. When the Lincolns arrived in Spain, all but a few handed their passports over to International Brigades officials for 'safekeeping', only to find that the half a year they expected to

serve wasn't as long as the International Brigades wanted. The International Brigades obscured the process, withholding passports and denying many even the concept of leave. The Lincolns had surrendered their passports to what was essentially a foreign power that would force them to serve until it deemed the fight was lost. Many Lincolns never had their passports returned, as they were appropriated for Soviet use abroad, with the most vicious example being a means for an agent to covertly travel to Mexico and assassinate Leon Trotsky with a Lincoln's passport.<sup>11</sup>

### The Battle of Jarama Valley

Tasked with fighting the trained, well organized Fascist forces, the Internationals were at a disadvantage when it came to fighting due to their greatly varying degrees of combat experience (from US Army training to no training whatsoever) as well as a disorganized command structure and an unfamiliarity with their own equipment. After their first and last marksmanship trainings, in which they were each allowed to fire five bullets into the side of a mountain, they rode off in trucks to the trenches of Jarama Valley. There, they would soon charge the enemy, aided by artillery in a poorly implemented plan<sup>12</sup> from Albacete, the seat of the International Brigades high command, which was safe in its position in the center of Republican territory hundreds of miles away.

Four days after arriving on the front, the Lincolns were ordered to advance with the help of a Spanish battalion that wasn't there, though Copic over the radio

insisted it was, and tank support consisting of two tanks that were soon forced into retreat, leaving the four hundred men fully exposed. The International Brigades command demanded a charge across an olive grove covered in barbed wire in the no-man's-land between the two trenches. Colonel Copic radioed the Lincoln's commander, Major Robert Merriman, to push the attack.

The Lincolns, trusting their superiors, ran forward as sporadic and inaccurate support from artillery failed to move the Nationalists from their posts.<sup>13</sup> The battalion Copic had insisted was on their flank to cover them never arrived, and the Lincolns were trapped, taking cover in the olive grove all day until nightfall allowed them to retreat. The Lincolns lost nearly a third of their four hundred men, while Merriman, honest enough to lead the charge, was shot in the arm and was removed from the front. He was among the one hundred and seventy five wounded, with only eighty healthy men remaining.<sup>14</sup> Weeks after the attack, Merriman, recovering, detailed the situation.

The plan of attack fell to pieces along the line. Our boys plenty brave-runners went one-by-one- great boys, and it grieves me to see them go. Copic finally told me to go and bawled me out for failing to move at 10 o'clock. I said the 24<sup>th</sup> had not yet moved and he said they were ahead of us 700 yards and we were their second line... After Copic, I observed the signals of the 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade and it was 700 meters behind our trench even yet... Three planes came instead of 20 and didn't do much. No runners, so I passed the signal to advance to try and break

through... I climbed up to pass on the signal and was wounded... We tried to advance, but many killed, and returned.<sup>15</sup>

### The Spanish Gold Reserve

In addition to the political motivations of the Soviet Union diverting from the war effort, the revisionists also cited the financial dimension of the arms trade between Spain and the Soviets as an important factor in why the Soviets so readily provided aid in the first place. Radosh describes the financial policy employed by the Soviets when arming the Spanish.

... The Soviets had no intention of giving the Spanish anything.

Whatever weapons or other supplies they wanted had to be paid for in hard cash. Not long after the war began, the Madrid government sent more than two-thirds of the Spanish gold reserve, much of it in rare coins, to Moscow for safekeeping. As the war progressed, the Spanish would gradually spend the gold, paying the Soviets for the weapons necessary to prosecute the war. Recent scholarship has shown that the Soviets overcharged the Republican government for these arms, inventing prices to coincide with the amount of Spanish gold in their hands.<sup>16</sup>

He then displays, in a declassified Soviet document from the Senior Major of State Security, a Soviet plan to purchase American planes with Spanish gold to be sent to

the Spanish Republic, but not before sending them to aid the Communists in China, delaying their arrival in Spain. All of this would be done without telling the Spanish.

Without deciding beforehand the question of purchasing all ten aircraft, I gave Thomson a directive to conclude a deal to acquire three DC-3s... in order to use them in the “Zet” operation (in China), where there is now a severe lack of transport aircraft given the increased transportation of people from the Union to “Zet”... With the purchase of three DC-3s for the “Zet” operation we will be able to present a demand to the “friends” about the immediate repayment of the cost of these aircraft to us.<sup>17</sup>

This accusation would make the role of the International Brigades one more closely connected to preying on the idealism of the volunteers to more cheaply fight and therefore prolong the war in order for the Soviets to most effectively drain the Spanish of their resources, namely \$518,000,000 in gold.<sup>18</sup> Eby goes on to state that one of the true victors of the Spanish Civil War was the Soviet Union, which would emerge with generous profits and an elevated political position regardless of the outcome in Spain.

If the Republic won, the victory belonged to the USSR, for having repudiated the hypocrisy of nonintervention. On the other hand, if the Nationalists won, the defeat could be blamed on the effete democracies that refused to assist the Republic. And in either case, the Communists did not have to ante up anything, for the costs were being borne by the other members of the Popular Front.<sup>19</sup>

## The Veterans' View

In spite of these allegations and having been defeated with casualties routinely reaching as high as sixty percent in each battle,<sup>20</sup> the veterans of the Lincoln Brigade predominantly shared a different view entirely. They believed that their defeat was not a product of mismanagement as much as waging a war without aid from the international community in the face of well-armed opposition. The International Brigades gave them a chance to fight back against Fascism that their own governments had been unwilling to extend. Harry Fisher, a volunteer for the Lincoln Brigade, shares the worldview that compelled him to enlist in the International Brigades in his memoir, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War*.

“You know, comrades, this is not just another picket line. This is a matter of life and death.” I knew what he was saying and understood his message, but I could not forget those poor, helpless people. I also knew it could happen here. My anger was so strong, I knew I had to go. Fascism simply had to be stopped. While the governments of Britain, France, and the United States made concession after concession to fascism, volunteers came from all over the world to aid the Spanish people. They understood what their governments refused to acknowledge: that fascism must be stopped in Spain.<sup>21</sup>

Young men jumped at the opportunity to take action in a time when Hitler and Mussolini had conquered everything in their way with impunity. Joining the International Brigades was especially appealing to Jewish volunteers like Fisher and Hyman Katz, who said in a letter to his mother, "Seeing all these things... can't you see that Fascism is our own problem- that it may come for us as it came to other countries?"<sup>22</sup> This proved to be a powerful and shared sentiment, as roughly fifty percent of the Lincoln Brigade volunteers were of Jewish descent.<sup>23</sup>

The International Brigades were also unique in their policy of racial equality at a time when segregation was considered the status quo in America. African American volunteers emerged, enthusiastic at the chance to be valued as much as white volunteers, race disappearing in the fight against Fascism. Canute Frankson speaks passionately about being offered this opportunity, "We will crush them. We will build us a new society- a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line, no Jim Crow trains, no lynching. That's why, my dear, I'm here in Spain."<sup>24</sup> Despite any falsehoods in how the International Brigades reported the state of the war in the Communist-run newspapers, such as the *Daily Worker*, the Brigades delivered when it came to treating black volunteers with respect and equality. The Lincoln Battalion, within the brigade, was briefly led by Oliver Law, a black officer, making the Battalion the first instance of white Americans fighting under the leadership of a black American. It was an extraordinary notion for James Yates, a black volunteer, who wrote that Law, his friend, had been given command. "...Oliver Law, who had been so helpful to me in Chicago, so distinguished himself on the battlefield that he

had been promoted to head a machine gun company.”<sup>25</sup> These factors led to a close ideological bond of the men to their cause.

Of the casualties of the war, many were ardently faithful to their cause, even in the face of death. One such soldier was Larry Kleidman, whose letters remained committed even to the last correspondence, describing the advances the battalion had made and a personal citation he received for “good work in a tight spot”. He had planned on rewriting the diary, which he lost during said advances.<sup>26</sup> Beleaguered as he was from the fighting, Kleidman did not appear to waver in his belief in the cause.

### An Asymmetrical War

The Lincolns fought in several battles with overwhelming odds against them, including increasingly potent Italian and German airpower as well as their own dwindling supplies. Many soldiers made the best of the situation with what they had to fight with, but it was evident that even in the best of the skirmishes in which they fought in that the war was becoming increasingly asymmetrical. Jack Freeman describes an encounter with a Fascist plane on the Ebro campaign. Despite the victory described in the story, the means with which it was achieved serves as a grim indication of the state of the Republic.

As they would swoop down low over us, the whole damned battalion turned its rifles up and kept up such a fire that we chased them off, made them run like hell. Maybe you don't know what a feeling that is.

These damned machines, so immense when they come down at you, so terrifyingly deadly in their effects- and this time we had them running from ordinary riflemen.<sup>27</sup>

Sandor Voros, another soldier at the Ebro front, stated in a more grounded fashion that, "If we only had enough artillery and aviation to match that sent in by Hitler and Mussolini, this war would be over in two weeks."<sup>28</sup> The problem for the Lincolns, from their point of view, was not one of questioning their cause, but one of lacking the proper resources to fight.

### Placing Blame on the Western Democracies

While it had been asserted by revisionist historians that the Lincoln Brigade was betrayed by the Soviets, the vast majority of the soldiers themselves felt that they had actually been betrayed by the United States and the other western democracies. In the documentary *The Good Fight: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War*, veteran Bill Bailey displays the rifle he fought with in Spain, which has the Soviet hammer and sickle stamped into its metal, and explains how he and many other Lincolns saw the Soviet Union's involvement.

The fact that the gun came from the Soviet Union endeared it more to me because no other country was doing it. The United States could've done it. All sorts of countries could have done it, come to the aid, but they didn't. And that's the fitting part of it; the sad story about Spain itself is the fact that the rest of the world sold Spain out. They had a

moment of truth when they could've stopped Hitler and the bastards missed the ball.<sup>29</sup>

The United States' neutrality was undoubtedly harmful to the Republic. Had appeasement been replaced with intervention or at the very least the sale of arms, the veterans felt that they could have won the war, but more than that, the United States had obstructed the Lincolns by making it illegal for any of them to go and fight in Spain. This policy was upheld by the French, and oftentimes, volunteers would be arrested before making it to Spain, which happened to Joe Dallet.

Twenty-five of us, seventeen Americans and eight Canadians, were picked up in a French fishing boat Saturday morning in French waters near the Spanish coast. We were just on a pleasure tour, but we were arrested by the nonintervention-commission and have been in a filthy jail since... The spirit, discipline, etc., of our boys are wonderful in spite of all our hardships, and we are treated splendidly by many political prisoners who were arrested crossing the frontier.<sup>30</sup>

Such an impedimentary approach was equally damaging when one considers its effect on supplies.

Despite the American public favoring aid to the Republic and celebrities such as Langston Hughes and Ernest Hemingway visiting the Lincoln Brigade in Spain, American foreign policy towards Spain remained strictly isolationist. Being overwhelmed by the German and Italian backed Nationalists, the Republic, desperate to end the foreign aid to the Nationalists, ordered a withdrawal of the International Brigades in the vain hope that international pressure would force the

Nationalists to do the same and dismiss their allies. When the Lincolns were dismissed from the conflict, many were disappointed at the notion of leaving before the war had concluded. Many were also content that even though the Republic had almost certainly lost the war, they had given their all for a cause they believe in, as stated by Fisher.

We weren't going to win this war, that was clear by now. But there had been a purpose to our fight, and that was what had given us strength. Otherwise this war would have been an unending horror, a tragic waste of precious life. But Spain's struggle was a different kind of war- a people's fight for its democratic rights. I felt proud to have been a part of the International volunteer army that had come to help Spain put an end to Fascism.<sup>31</sup>

This point of view was not shared by the United States government.

The United States added insult to injury when the Lincolns attempted to return only to find that the nonintervention policy, championed by the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, aimed to bar them from returning home. There were over 400 veterans in the French city of Ripoll hoping for transit back to America after the International Brigades were dismissed. The British extended enough fare for their volunteers to return home, though the Lincolns had to raise their own money via donations. Less than a tenth still possessed passports, as many were taken by the Soviets and more were doubtless lost in the retreats. The Lincolns were only able to return after a lengthy period of sworn affidavits and forms being filled out. The

Soviets relinquished 201 passports when it became the alternative to housing the veterans while the rest of them waited to be verified.<sup>32</sup>

### Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

Further harassment by the American government became an unfortunate fact of life for the Lincoln Brigade veterans due to their ties to Communist International and the International Brigades.<sup>33</sup> In the hysteria of the McCarthy era, they were incensed to find that they were held as criminals for being the first of their countrymen to fight Fascism, some of them even enlisting to serve in the US military in the Second World War. They were branded “Premature Anti-Fascists”<sup>34</sup> and though the charges were eventually dropped, the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) would not sit idly by in the face of future injustices.

Abe Osheroff, a prominent member of VALB and activist, toured giving speeches until his death in 2008. “‘The stuff we’re made of never goes away, with or without monuments,’ he said in the old-time Brooklyn accent he never lost, Mr. Geist and other friends said. ‘Because the bastards will never cease their evil, and the decent human beings will never stop their struggle.’”<sup>35</sup> He went on to add when commenting on the war in 2000, “If you need a victory, you aren’t a fighter,” he said in 2000, “you’re an opportunist.”<sup>36</sup> Milton Wolff, the last commander of the Lincolns, died earlier in 2008, also leaving behind him a legacy of activism and commitment to the causes for which he fought.

Mr. Wolff never stopped defying authority. He helped lead the fight against United States support of Franco's government and battled fiercely for civil rights and against the Vietnam War... He later fought successfully against the "subversive" label pinned on the Lincoln veterans for decades. He personally delivered 20 ambulances to the Nicaraguan government when the Reagan administration was supporting rebels against it.<sup>37</sup>

Wolff also led VALB for a number of years, remaining effective in the activist community. James Yates, who described his years in the McCarthy era as a time when the FBI harassed him and had him denied every job he applied for. He would also find a way to continue his fight, as he became the president of the Greenwich Village-Chelsea chapter of the NAACP, organizing food, clothing, and volunteers for the front line of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi from 1964-1968.<sup>38</sup>

Most tellingly of the Lincoln Brigade veterans' adherence to their cause and beliefs even decades after the end of the war is Del Berg, the last surviving member of the brigade. Now 99, Berg wrote an article for the *New York Times* on March 13<sup>th</sup> of this year describing his legacy of service in the Lincoln Brigade, remembering the plight of the Spanish people experiencing poverty on top of the war tearing their country apart. Berg, though one of the later volunteers, was determined to do his part in Spain, finding passage over with three others thanks to the help of the Medical Bureau to Aid the Spanish Democracy. He was wounded by shrapnel while working in a Republican medical base during the Ebro offensive and was then sent home, but Berg considered his service to be far from over.

By then Franco's troops had already taken over most of the Republic. We could do nothing to influence the outcome, so we were sent home. I felt so strongly about the Spanish people's struggle that when I got back to the United States, I wanted to do the same thing here, in my own way. I wanted to remain active in the working people's movement. I became a switchboard operator in the Army during the Second World War and was part of the effort to defeat Fascism. After the war, I worked with the United Farm Workers, and later was elected vice president of the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. It bothers me a little that at 99 you're going to die any minute, because I have a lot of other things I want to do.<sup>39</sup>

Berg, even to this day, holds the beliefs that compelled him to volunteer in Spain, faith unshaken by what he'd seen and his values proven by his lifetime of contributions to the fight against Fascism and then to the fight for labor and against social injustice.

### The Volunteers' Environment

They were just a few of the Lincoln Brigade veterans that continued work in the spirit of what they had initially gone to Spain to fight for, as committed to their beliefs as the day they volunteered. One could only imagine how such differing conclusions can be drawn between those of the veterans and those of the revisionist historians. A key means of understanding the differences in the interpretation of the

war is to examine the political situation in which both groups lived. For the members of the Lincoln Brigade, this meant coming of age in the Great Depression.

Due to the crash of the stock market, faith in capitalism was soundly shaken as the country plunged into poverty. Many saw Communism as an alternative system, which could provide for the impoverished, while the number of people joining labor unions and clamoring for change skyrocketed. Communism was not viewed as the demonized system Americans held it as during the Cold War era. There were numerous Communist newspapers and one reading these would have been subjected to numerous falsehoods. While other newspapers gave a less biased account of the war in Spain, many Communists who only read papers like *The Daily Worker* would be completely unaware of defeats and massive casualties like the one that had occurred at Jarama. Newspapers like the *Southern Worker*, for example, would feature articles such as the article from Lincoln Brigade Volunteer Kenneth Bridenthal from his post in Spain in September 1937.

I joined the Communist Party of the United States after I saw the stand they took on organization, wages, and conditions for the workers back in Alabama. And if I hadn't realized how right they were in the interest of the common people, and how they can stand under the gaff under fire, I saw it here (Spain).<sup>40</sup>

The article, a glowing endorsement for the International Brigades, was located above a tactfully placed mail-in insert to sign up for the Communist Party, the most prominent feature being the boldface lettering significantly larger than the rest of the text reading "Join Now!". Placed after the article about a local volunteer's

enlistment for Spain, it forms a subtle link for the reader between joining the Communist Party and joining the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. This is similar to how the name “Abraham Lincoln Brigade” was created by party officials to appeal to a sense of national pride and lust for freedom, instead of the volunteers that the party claimed named the unit themselves. Likewise, the first unit of Americans fighting in Spain was a battalion, a unit one-third the size of a brigade, but was sold to the American people as a brigade in order to overstate their presence and give the illusion of wider public support. While it would eventually become a full brigade composed of several battalions, it wasn’t until a new wave of volunteers arrived having heard of the brigade that they would have enough men to form one.

Even reading between the lines of this Communist Party Newspaper, one found only chronicles of glory and never hints of catastrophe.

Readers were told that in its first battle the Lincoln Battalion of the famous International Brigades had advanced “almost half a mile” into territory disputed not only by the mercenaries of General Franco but also by the bullies of Mussolini and the butchers of Hitler. Other newspapers in the United States agreed that the presence of the Americans fighting in Republican Spain made sensational copy, although their stories rarely reached the exuberance of the *Worker*, where columnists did not have to limit themselves to the barebones of fact.<sup>41</sup>

It set a precedent for questionable, oftentimes outright false, reporting and for many  
Lincolns, it wasn't until they were in Spain fighting a completely different war from  
the one described that they fully understood the extent of the bias.

### The Differing Opinions of the Lincoln Brigade by Contemporary Writers

There was also an avid supporter of their cause in one of the most influential  
writers of the era, Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway himself visited the Lincoln  
Brigade on numerous occasions, gathering material on which he would write *For  
Whom the Bell Tolls*, in which the main character, Robert Jordan, is based on Robert  
Merriman, the Lincoln Brigade's commander at Jarama and prominent Major until  
his death. He became personal friends with many of the soldiers, including Evan  
Shipman, Martin Hourihan and Milton Wolff. Shipman would go on to write  
Hemingway a fond letter at the end of the war as a reference of Hemingway's deep  
connection to the volunteers and faith in their cause.

I guess you know that I want to tell you how glad I am that I went to  
Spain. I owe Spain a great deal. I owe you a great deal. At the time I  
went, I was in a bad state in many ways, both discouraged and  
confounded. I am neither today.<sup>42</sup>

Hemingway describes the war in Spain as a lost but noble cause and through his  
book, the sacrifices made and the grim feeling of ground being lost and the approach  
of death in the face of the enemy becomes all too clear. An outstanding victory is  
achieved when Robert and his comrades destroy a bridge necessary to the Fascist

advance, though this is at a substantial cost, as most of them sacrifice their lives in the process. Robert himself is crippled in the process and is unable to flee, leaving his allies and his love, Maria, to escape while he contemplates how to live his last moments before the arrival of the advancing Fascists. While suicide may have presented the easier option, Robert vows to fight to his last breath, determined to make any action he takes one in service of the worthy cause of the Republic. "And if you wait and hold them up even a little while or just get the officer, that may make all the difference. One thing done well can make-".<sup>43</sup> Though Hemingway criticizes the leadership of the International Brigades, especially that of Andre Marty<sup>44</sup>, he doesn't falter in his endorsement of the fight that the Lincoln Brigade waged against Fascism, and would maintain his friendships with the veterans for many years. Hemingway would appear as late as the routes at Gandesa to show his support for the Lincoln Brigade, at possibly its lowest moment, hearing that the brigade had been wiped out. Hemingway himself, meeting with the remainder of the brigade yelled into Fascist territory "You Fascist bastards haven't won yet! We'll show you!"<sup>45</sup>

While Hemingway, a prolific author with a large degree of exposure was a topic of much discussion, John Dos Passos, a prominent writer in his own right, was also involved with the Lincoln Brigade to much less acclaim. Though he would not be as deeply connected to the brigade as Hemingway was, he was studying collective farming in the villages near Hotel de Florida, a hub for American and British journalists in Spain.<sup>46</sup> He was hardly mentioned by Eby, especially in comparison to Hemingway, who would frequently interact with the brigade, but his experiences in

Spain would culminate in a decisive shift in his politics from left to right. Dos Passos would see a political trajectory of studying collective farming in Republican Spain to supporting Goldwater and Nixon in their presidential campaigns until his death in 1970. In his book *Adventures of a Young Man*, the cracks in his commitment to the Communist Party were evident, as he goes so far as to call the Soviet Union as much of a threat to Republican Spain as the Fascists.

'Friend', he went on, 'Here several different kinds of war. We fight Franco but also we fight Moscow... if you go to the Brigadista you must not let them fight us. They want to destroy our collectives. They want to institute dictatorship of secret police just like Franco. We have to fight both sides to protect our revolution.'<sup>47</sup>

Even more telling of his disillusionment, in a sentiment comparable to that of the historical revisionists, he would address the reader directly at the end of the novel, clearly very disillusioned in the International Brigades as opposed to where his view had began.

In America, the Communist Party grew powerful and remarkably rich out of the ruin of freedom in Europe and the sacrifice of righteous men. Agents of the Kremlin plan were able to play on the benevolence of busy-bodies, the blindness of charitable do-gooders, and the vanity of well-to-do young men with windy brains. Stalin, the schoolmaster of Fascism, could become in the editorials in liberal newspapers the grand anti-Fascist.<sup>48</sup>

Another factor to consider when examining why the Lincoln Brigade was predominantly unshaken in their beliefs was the fact that they were serving within the International Brigades, an organization linked to the Soviet Union, rather than one of the other leftist movements that had fought Franco independently of the Soviet sphere of influence. George Orwell, then an idealistic leftist, had joined the Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) only to find himself and his fellow members of POUM suppressed under Soviet Authority, which had been intolerant of differing political ideologies among the volunteer groups in Spain. While there were Socialists, Anarchists, Trotskyists, liberals, anti-Fascists, and even apolitical volunteers among the Lincoln Brigade, those views tended to be homogenized by the political commissars and the strict Communist mentality expected of the International Brigades. They were watched for their beliefs, but groups like the anarchist POUM were labeled as outright threats to be dealt with. Orwell went on to describe his account of the propaganda leveled against the Anarchists and the infighting that scarred the ranks of the Republic's allies in *Homage to Catalonia*.

A tremendous dust was kicked up in the foreign anti-Fascist press, but, as usual, only one side of this case has had anything like a hearing. As a result the Barcelona fighting has been represented as an insurrection by disloyal Anarchists and Trotskyists who were 'stabbing the Spanish Government in the back' and so forth. The issue was not quite so simple as that. Undoubtedly when you are at war with a deadly enemy it is better not to begin fighting among yourselves; but it is worth remembering that it takes two to make a

quarrel and that people do not begin building barricades unless they have received something they regard as provocation.<sup>49</sup>

Though alternative viewpoints did exist among their peers and were made available, the majority of Lincoln Brigade veterans remained loyal to their initial cause, quite possibly because of the perspective they possessed as soldiers for the main body of the International Brigades, hearing about POUM as if they were troublemakers and fringe elements. The news they were given came from heavily biased sources and the sights they saw were of both an active Soviet/International Brigades involvement in Spain and a distinct lack of desperately needed aid from the west, a lack of resources being a more easily understood and concrete reason for defeat than the military incompetence only uncovered in full decades later by the revisionists. Theirs was a hard-fought war that they believed in, and for them the experiences there were of fighting back and helping Spain without the present counterbalance of documents and dissenting opinions such as Orwell's to give a different perspective; it would be impossible for them to claim otherwise.

### The Revisionists and Their Environment

The revisionist historians attacking the International Brigades for their role in the Lincolns' sacrifices and defeat come from another environment entirely, namely one with a decidedly more right-wing viewpoint from that of America in the 1930s. Ronald Reagan openly stated that he believed that the Lincoln Brigade fought on the wrong side of the Spanish Civil War, in essence siding with Franco and the

Fascists. "Well, if you get into the moral issue of it, we were certainly tested with regard to the Spanish Civil War... I would say that the individuals that went over there were, in the opinions of most Americans, fighting on the wrong side."<sup>50</sup> In addition to offending the Spanish public, this comment illustrates the shift in the political climate to the far-right.

Radosh writes from a rightist perspective, having been born into a leftist family but eventually switching sides to become a conservative. As despite the objective nature of the documents themselves, Radosh himself comes from a background personally intertwined with the issues at hand. One of his books, *The Rosenberg File: A Search For Truth*, goes so far as to unequivocally condemn the actions of the Rosenbergs, focusing on their guilt rather than observing it in the larger picture of McCarthyism and the hysteria that it would cause. Eby's writing also comes from a time in which Communism was soundly defeated, and though he is the less political of the two, the mindset of a historian writing in a post-Soviet world is still something to consider. Eby had come under criticism from Abraham Lincoln Battalion Archives for his account of the death of Oliver Law, who he wrote according to testimony given by a William Herrick, a disgruntled veteran, that Law's own men joyously desecrated his body after they killed him for his poor leadership, leaving him disfigured and rotting in the sun.<sup>51</sup> Fisher strongly repudiates this, claiming that Law was carried away when wounded, saying that the wound wasn't so bad and that he'd be back.<sup>52</sup> ALBA, on its website, published an article which stated "According to eyewitness accounts of men under his command, Law died a hero's death leading a charge against Francoist forces on Mosquito Hill at the Battle

of Brunete on July 9, 1937.”<sup>53</sup> This version of events has gained significantly more credence among veterans than Eby’s.

## Conclusion

The vastly different views of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade’s, and indeed the International Brigades’ roles in Spain can be understood when one examines the perspectives on which they are founded. What one faction viewed as a misled, covertly opportunistic endeavor is viewed by the other as a matter of morality and a cause to be carried on until death. Radosh best encapsulates his argument in a scathing attack on the Soviet Union’s intentions for the International Brigades in Spain.

...Stalin would provide enough military aid to allow the Republic to defend itself, but not enough to frighten or outrage the West. Moreover, his aid included internal intervention in the policies of the Republic... The Communists in Spain, acting under Soviet guidance, would become a bulwark against revolution, collectivization, and social disorder, while seeking to manipulate and control events for their own ends.<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, James Neugass, veteran and author of the memoir *War is Beautiful: An American Ambulance Driver in the Spanish Civil War*, best summarizes the view held by the majority of the Lincoln Brigade Veterans.

When the Italian bombs and German shells have mixed our bodies with the earth that should have defended them, Franco goes over the top and kills them again, in the name of a class whose traditions are of silence, cruelty, blindness, vainglory, and possession. These were and are the traditions of the Few. The traditions of the Many are kindness, self-control, patience and a profound conviction that the ever-increasing wealth of the world is to be shared by the people of the world. I never heard a Spaniard lift his voice. I never saw a drunken Spaniard. I never had a favor refused. More discipline, more orders, and an atmosphere of greater and more blind obedience would have and will help us win. The decisive conditions for the winning of the war are not being fought in Spain but in Washington, London, and Paris.<sup>55</sup>

When Neugass mentions more discipline, orders, and blind obedience, he even begins to sound as if he is in full agreement not only with the cause that the International Brigades put forth, but the leadership of the International Brigades themselves, a position beyond belief for the revisionist historians. These arguments serve as a perfect example of the differing, oftentimes diametrically opposed views and bring the important distinction between them to the center of discussion.

The conclusions drawn by each of these groups emerge from a complex set of circumstances including the experiences seen versus the opinions reached via intensive analysis, the exposure to either biased news sources and far-reaching propaganda or to documents to be seen with the benefits of both hindsight and

observation from the status of a victorious party, and of course the politics of the era in which the political opinions are formed. What appears to one as a matter of betrayal and cynicism appears to another as a matter of the utmost sincerity and nobility in sacrifice. With both views and the experiences and pressures that formed them, the opportunity exists to gain a deeper understanding of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, what they were fighting for in Spain, what were the causes of their defeat, and their legacy in the wake of the war's end.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Eby, Cecil B, *Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*. (University Park: 2007.) p. xiii
- <sup>2</sup> Nelson, Cary, *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War*. (New York: Routledge, 1996.) p. 51
- <sup>3</sup> Martin, Douglass. "Milton Wolff, 92, Dies; Anti-Franco Leader." *The New York Times*. 1/17/2008. Web.
- <sup>4</sup> Eby, p. 66
- <sup>5</sup> Radosh, Ronald, *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union and the Spanish Civil War*. (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 2001) p. 462
- <sup>6</sup>Eby, p. 65
- <sup>7</sup> Eby. p. 214
- <sup>8</sup> Eby. p. 26
- <sup>9</sup> Radosh, p. 242
- <sup>10</sup> Radosh. p. 271-5
- <sup>11</sup> Eby. p. 26
- <sup>12</sup> Eby. p. 75
- <sup>13</sup> Nelson, p. 82
- <sup>14</sup> Eby. p. 78
- <sup>15</sup> Nelson, p. 86
- <sup>16</sup> Radosh, p. 88.
- <sup>17</sup> Radosh. p. 430
- <sup>18</sup> Eby. p. 135
- <sup>19</sup> Eby. p. 135
- <sup>20</sup> Eby. p. 208
- <sup>21</sup> Fisher, p. 16
- <sup>22</sup> Nelson. p. 32
- <sup>23</sup> Eby. p. 179
- <sup>24</sup> Nelson. p. 34
- <sup>25</sup> Yates, James. *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. (Open Hand Press 1989.) p. 120
- <sup>26</sup> Blumberg, Barbara et al (editors). *World Wars and Cold War: Readings in Foreign and Domestic Policy*. Revised Printing 2002 Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.
- <sup>27</sup> Nelson. p. 401
- <sup>28</sup> Nelson. p. 405
- <sup>29</sup> Buckner, Noel dir. *The Good Fight: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War*. (1984; New York, NY: Kino International Corp. 2008), DVD. 1:10:34.
- <sup>30</sup> Nelson. p. 69
- <sup>31</sup> Fisher. p. 158
- <sup>32</sup> Eby. p. 413
- <sup>33</sup> Buckner. 1:27:57
- <sup>34</sup> Buckner. 1:27:45
- <sup>35</sup> Martin, Douglass. "Abe Osheroff, Veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Dies at 92." *The New York Times*. 4/11/2008. Web.

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- <sup>36</sup> Martin, 4/11/2008. Web.
- <sup>37</sup> Martin, 1/17/2008. Web.
- <sup>38</sup> Yates, p. 162.
- <sup>39</sup> Berg, Del. "The Last Volunteer." *The New York Times*. 3/13/2015. Web
- <sup>40</sup> Bridenthal, Kenneth. "From a Southern Worker in Spain." *The Southern Worker*. 9/1937. p. 13. Web.
- <sup>41</sup> Eby. p. 131
- <sup>42</sup> Nelson, p. 465
- <sup>43</sup> Hemingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. (Schribner: 1940) p. 470
- <sup>44</sup> Hemingway, p. 207
- <sup>45</sup> Eby, p. 340
- <sup>46</sup> Eby, p. 119
- <sup>47</sup> Dos Passos, John. *Adventures of a Young Man*. (Houghton Mifflin Company: 1938) p. 323
- <sup>48</sup> Dos Passos, p. 341
- <sup>49</sup> Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1952.) P. 157
- <sup>50</sup> "Remark by Reagan on Lincoln Brigade Prompt Ire in Spain." *The New York Times*. 5/10/1985. Web.
- <sup>51</sup> Eby. p. 190
- <sup>52</sup> Fisher. p. 62
- <sup>53</sup> Furr, Grover. "Anatomy of a Lie." *The Volunteer: Founded by the VALB*. 6/1/2010. Web.
- <sup>54</sup> Radosh. p. xxx (historical background).
- <sup>55</sup> Neugass, James, *War is Beautiful: An American Ambulance Driver in the Spanish Civil War*. (New Press: 2008) p. 309

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