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*The Mighty Ninety:
Black Americans Championing the Cause of Freedom in Republican Spain*

ABSTRACT: *This article assesses the experience of the ninety African Americans who volunteered to fight against the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Based on these veterans' testimonies, it argues that they went to Spain believing that they were fighting the same oppressive forces that were behind Jim Crow and segregation in the U.S.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Second Spanish Republic; Spanish Civil War; U.S.; African Americans; Abraham Lincoln Brigade; Oliver Law; Fascism; Communism; testimonies*

Introduction

The military rebellion that challenged the democratically elected government of Spain in 1936 was a Nationalist coup that followed in the footsteps of Italian and German fascist takeovers. Invading the Iberian Peninsula from its colony in Morocco, the Nationalists unleashed a savagery on Spain that would become a catalyst for the atrocities of World War II. Democracies around the world failed to come to the aid of Spain, but individual citizens with a strong conviction against this unlawful attack decided to take action. Among these volunteers were ninety African Americans who, while facing significant challenges in their own country, determined that the fight in Spain was their fight. Spain became the place where they could confront the same forces that were oppressing them at home.

The African Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) had long been on the receiving end of a prejudiced system. They could and did relate to a Spanish working class that had everything to lose from a Nationalist takeover. Those Black Americans who went to Spain did not leave behind a peaceful existence. Official and unofficial government policies were treating them as second-class citizens from Harlem to Montgomery, discriminating against them at every level. The lynching of African Americans was not an uncommon occurrence in the 1930s. The heavily biased and unfair American judicial system would condemn African Americans to death based on the flimsiest of evidence, as in the Scottsboro case of 1931, when eight teenagers were sentenced to death in Alabama after being accused of raping a White woman on a train.¹ Similar racism and prejudice against Blacks across the Atlantic had allowed fascist Italy to use poison gas on Ethiopians with no real repercussions from other "civilized" nations who themselves possessed colonies overseas. These same Italian Fascists were now enabling General Francisco Franco's Nationalists in Spain.

There was no single reason why African Americans volunteered to fight in Spain. Some were outraged by Italian atrocities in Ethiopia and frustrated at their inability to do more. Others believed there would be no place for them in a fascist

¹ Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 39.

world. Edwin Rolfe (1909-1954), a journalist and eyewitness of the Spanish Civil War, commented that “the bridge between the impulse and the act (of volunteering) is a highly personal process, one that men rarely divulge to others [...] there is a no man’s land between conviction and action into which the great majority of humankind never venture.”² Many African Americans certainly opposed the Nationalist invasion of Spain but few considered taking an active part in its defense. Those who volunteered to fight in Spain had a lot in common, and when looking at them as a whole, certain patterns emerge. Very much forebears of the Civil Rights leaders of the 1960s, they were not individuals who would be content with waiting for change. The one characteristic that Black volunteers shared was their confrontational stance against the injustices being committed around them. Most volunteers had led or participated in protests against established segregation or unjust labor and housing practices that were keeping African Americans living in abject poverty. In other words, African American volunteers were vocal activists.

I. Historiography

The most extensive academic work on the topic considered here is Victor A. Berch’s *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: “This Ain’t Ethiopia but It’ll Do”* (1992). One of the few publications solely dedicated to the African American volunteers, it is a collection of reports, testimonies, and interviews from the volunteers themselves. Berch praises the Black volunteers and does not shy away from their links to Communism, no matter how detrimental these later became during the Cold War. He denounces the United States (U.S.) government for its unjust policies toward the “Lincolns,” as the volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were known, and addresses the fact that Republican Spain itself had a checkered human rights record.³ Republican Spain maintained a colony in Morocco and had no intention of giving it up during the war. In the 1920s, a large section of the Spanish population had rallied around General Miguel Primo de Rivera’s pacification of the Rif tribes in North Africa.⁴ This begs the question, why did these African Americans go to Spain? What caused them to identify with the Spanish Republic? This article argues that the African Americans who went to fight Fascism in Spain believed they were fighting the same oppressive forces that were behind Jim Crow and segregation.

The aforementioned Edwin Rolfe served as a war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, and his work, *The Lincoln Battalion* (1939), was the first

² Edwin Rolfe, *The Lincoln Battalion: The Story of the Americans Who Fought in Spain in the International Brigades* (New York: Random House, 1939), 15.

³ Victor A. Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: “This Ain’t Ethiopia but It’ll Do”*, ed. Danny Duncan Collum (New York: G. K. Hall and Co., 1992), 32.

⁴ Nigel Townson, “The Contested Quest for Modernization, 1914-1936,” in *The History of Modern Spain: Chronologies, Themes, Individuals*, ed. Adrian Shubert and José Alvarez Junco (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 64-81, here 73.

published account of these American volunteers.⁵ Rolfe set a precedent for future authors, exemplifying the Lincolns' selfless behavior but avoiding some of the more complicated aspects concerning the Republic, especially its colonialism. He provided numerous examples of African American participation but did not focus on them in particular, since this was not the subject of his book. With its exceptional attention to detail, Rolfe's account of the African Americans displays a dignity unusual for its time. Subsequent authors, such as Paul Preston, Antony Beevor, and Adam Hochschild, have certainly acknowledged the Black Lincolns, but their works are not entirely devoted to the African American volunteers.⁶ This is not unusual or meant to discredit the Black volunteers. It simply reflects the fact that out of the 3,200 American volunteers only ninety, or 4%, were Black.

American author and a Lincoln veteran himself, Arthur H. Landis (1917-1986) captured the true importance of these volunteers when he stated that "from the very beginning, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was an integrated unit,"⁷ pointing out that "the concepts of real freedom embodied in the general antifascist philosophy [...] precluded any idea of racial superiority or minority discrimination."⁸ These important distinctions marked the ideological beliefs that these volunteers brought with them to Spain and embodied their communal spirit.

Peter N. Carroll, one of the foremost experts on the Lincoln Brigade, discusses the role of African Americans in his monograph, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (1994).⁹ He devotes a dozen or so pages to the Black volunteers, providing much praise but also criticism, as in the case of the high-ranking Communist Party member Harry Haywood (1898-1985). Carroll's book is extensively researched and one of the most complete accounts of the Lincolns. Carroll makes an astute observation when he notes that, "without exception, the African Americans who served in the Lincoln Brigade could testify to the double burden of economic hardship and racial injustice."¹⁰

Americans typically do not know much about these "premature anti-Fascists" who fought in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s.¹¹ The World War that followed right on its heels would and still does capture more of the public's attention. Thus, even today, a fair representation of what took place is hard to come by. Authors

⁵ Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*.

⁶ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006); Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain* (New York: Penguin Press, 1982); Adam Hochschild, *Spain in our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (New York: Mariner Books, 2016).

⁷ Arthur H. Landis, *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (first published 1967; New York: The Citadel Press, 1968), 73.

⁸ Landis, *Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 73.

⁹ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Closer to a Battalion in size, the Lincoln Battalion was a subordinate unit of the 15th International Brigade of the Spanish Republican Army.

¹⁰ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 27.

¹¹ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 250.

who bother to cover the Spanish Civil War disproportionately glorify the Republic, while avoiding some of its more troublesome aspects, such as atrocities against the civilian population, a racist attitude toward the Moroccan troops serving in the Army of Africa under Franco, and an unwillingness to liberate Spanish Morocco during the conflict. The Spanish Civil War does not garner much attention beyond a casual mention of the Nazi-sponsored Condor Legion or of the famous authors Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell who both participated in the conflict. America was too preoccupied with domestic issues like the Great Depression to concern itself with what was going on in Spain. No U.S. administration would have survived the vast expenditure of money that would have been required to save the Spanish Republic at a time when unemployment in America hovered around 14%. By 1939, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt may have regretted not doing enough to save Republican Spain, for it was now painfully obvious that the Nationalist victory made Europe far less stable than anyone could have ever imagined.¹² England would pay a heavy price for its non-intervention, with Germany using the Spanish ports of Vigo and Cádiz as resupply bases for its U-boats during World War II.¹³

II. *The War in Spain*

A complicated mosaic of political parties, ideologies, and ethnic groups had divided Spain for generations before the Civil War broke out in 1936. Very much a declining power by the end of the nineteenth century, Spain had undergone profound changes in its government that ranged from a parliamentary monarchy to a military dictatorship under General Primo de Rivera from 1923 to 1931. The Spanish King Alfonso XIII (r. 1886-1931), who had aligned himself to this unstable entity, lacked the political support to save himself when the Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed in April 1931 and had to go into exile. The Second Republic (1931-1939) gave a voice to some powerful new arrivals on the Left, including the General Union of Workers (*Unión General de Trabajadores*) and the Anarchist National Confederation of Labor (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*). These organizations maintained militias that would play a significant role in the coming Civil War. Communist organizations also made an appearance, with the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*) and the Soviet-backed Communist Party of Spain (*Partido Comunista de España*) being the two dominant groups. Yet, despite these newcomers, the moderate Socialist organizations formed the backbone of the Spanish Republic that ruled the country from 1931 until the end of the Civil War in 1939. Ethnic minorities, such as the Basques and the Catalans, were concerned about autonomy and generally sided with the more tolerant Republic, and so did a majority of the working population

¹² Hochschild, *Spain in our Hearts*, 353.

¹³ Charles B. Burdick, "The Resupply of German Submarines in Spain, 1939-1942," *Central European History* 3, no. 3 (September 1970): 256-284.

in Madrid and Barcelona. The Nationalists that constituted the Spanish Right comprised Catholics, Monarchists, Fascists, and most of the country's monolithic military, particularly those stationed in the colonial outpost of Morocco.

Both sides were quite fragmented, but the Right proved far more capable of setting their differences aside during the conflict. The Republicans continuously fought among themselves even during the war, for example, during the May Days of 1937 in Barcelona. The Nationalists also succeeded in other ways that were not so obvious. They were far more successful at lobbying foreign support, which came in the way of tanks, airplanes, and troops from Italy and Germany. Sympathetic American businesses provided oil and trucks to the Nationalists on credit.¹⁴ Perhaps the biggest Nationalist diplomatic victory was not antagonizing the Western democracies into joining the conflict on the side of the Republic.

The Second Spanish Republic was a progressive, reform-minded government body that initiated programs intended to break the land monopoly of the country's landowning barons while advocating in favor of a liberal agenda in the areas of education, women's suffrage, and workers' rights. The Republic's fatal mistake was implementing these reforms far too quickly for the general public to keep up or support. It must be remembered that Spain had not developed at the same pace as other Western European countries. Even African American volunteers arriving in Spain at the height of the Great Depression commented on the shocking levels of poverty that were the reality in the Spanish countryside in the 1930s. Fears of a Communist revolution similar to the one that had taken place in Russia bordered on paranoia in the upper echelons of Spanish society despite the fact that the Communist Party was only a minor player in Spanish politics before the war. American volunteers would have to tread carefully in this political minefield.

III. *The Communist Connection*

It is imperative to understand the role of the Communist Party in getting American volunteers to Spain, as many of them could not have afforded the travel. The collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in 1929 is an integral part of this story. This singular event left millions of Americans unemployed for a generation. It worsened an already bad situation for African Americans, a minority group "already plagued by high rates of poverty, poor living conditions, low wages, and race, gender, and class discrimination."¹⁵ American historian Robin D. G. Kelley explains that the "enlightened attitude of the Russian Bolshevik toward national minorities and the Communist Party's support of Black male leadership and cultural expression motivated a small group of Black intellectuals and working-class laborers to join the Communist Party."¹⁶

¹⁴ Hochschild, *Spain in our Hearts*, 358.

¹⁵ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? African Americans, 1925-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

¹⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 112.

This phenomenon has to be viewed through the lenses of the 1930s, when the Soviet Union was still a credible force that attracted a respectable following, including union leaders and academics. Seattle native and Lincoln volunteer Albert Chisholm (1913-1998) recalled that “no one in Seattle was standing up for the rights of Blacks at the time. The Communists were the only ones who did. I never would have gone to sea if not for the Young Communist League,” referring to his employment on a passenger liner to the Far East in the early 1930s.¹⁷ Sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton have remarked that the Depression “prompted many Black Chicagoans to seek assistance from Leftist organizations [...] when faced with unemployment and housing evictions, it was not unusual for a mother to shout to the children ‘Run quick and find the Reds!’”¹⁸

Communist organizers began recruiting for the Spanish Republic largely in secret, “not because Communists harbored a devious conspiracy to overthrow the government [...] but because party leaders did not wish to be caught violating American recruitment laws.”¹⁹ The Communists seemed to be the only organization willing to assist the Spanish Republic. Since August 1936, most Western democracies had decided on a policy of non-intervention, and early Nationalist victories at San Sebastián and Alcázar had alarmed the Soviets. Peter Carroll notes that “the speed with which the American Communist party assumed leadership in directing personnel and material aid to Republican Spain reflected its apocalyptic ideology.”²⁰ It also reflected a geopolitical reality that the Soviet Union could not ignore, lest it be the next victim of a fascist Europe. Now would be the time for “the legions of the proletariat [...] to defend their class interests.”²¹ Fascists in Italy and Germany had consolidated their power by making an enemy out of Bolshevism, and the situation continued to deteriorate now that they were firmly established. The Soviet Union faced a real threat to its existence. Communism and its desire to unite the workers of the world had certainly provoked the Spanish Nationalists who were painting the Republic as a staunchly Communist entity, even though there were many political groups represented in the Second Republic. It was a convenient excuse, but it was a generalization. The Communist alliance with the Soviet Union simply posed the biggest threat to Nationalist success, so they bore the brunt of conservative abuse, particularly in propaganda. The Nationalists capitalized on this Bolshevik-phobia by blaming the country’s failures on an obscure Jewish-Masonic-Communist conspiracy, the defeat of which was their primary reason for invading the Peninsula. The vast

¹⁷ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 39.

¹⁸ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945), 87.

¹⁹ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 64.

²⁰ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 71.

²¹ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 71.

amounts of aid provided to the Republic by the Soviet Union certainly did not help the matter, but the Jewish connection was pure fascist propaganda.

Black Nationalist groups such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) already existed to promote the rights of African Americans. It was largely due to their ineffectiveness that some Blacks turned to the Communist Party. Lincoln veteran and Harlem Black activist Vaughn Love (1907-1990) expressed that “the NAACP had nothing of interest for the rank and file of Blacks. They might get you into college but for the masses of people, they had nothing for you.”²² Love seriously considered enlisting in the Ethiopian Army in 1936 “but, he later explained, the contacts weren’t good and the war didn’t last long.”²³ African Americans united with sympathetic Whites against the common class enemy, and the “Communist Party welcomed disaffected Blacks and strove to eliminate every vestige of discrimination.”²⁴ That the American Communist Party was controlled and funded by the Soviet Union was hardly a secret, as the experience of one former Lincoln by the name of Admiral Kilpatrick (1898-1992) illustrates.

Kilpatrick was a politically active worker from Cleveland, Ohio, who had joined the American Communist Party early in its existence. Accustomed to serving at the forefront of unions and labor movements, he joined the Party in 1927 and attended school in the Soviet Union in 1934.²⁵ Several other prominent members of the Lincoln Brigade spent time in the Soviet Union, including the Berkeley-educated Robert Hale Merriman (1908-1938) and the aforementioned Harry Haywood of the American Communist Party. As for the adventurous Kilpatrick, he returned to America in 1935 only to volunteer for the Spanish Civil War two years later. The Communist Party played a vital role in financing these voyages. Another Black volunteer by the name of Oscar Hunter (1908-1983) described the process. Already a member of the Communist Party in New York City, Hunter approached a district organizer by the name of Morris Chiles and expressed his interest in going to Spain. “And it was all settled,”²⁶ noted the nonchalant Hunter, as if joining a volunteer army overseas was the most natural thing to do. With Communist assistance, he would cross the Atlantic alongside fellow Lincoln volunteer Oliver Law (1900-1937) in the early months of 1937.

IV. Oliver Law and the Volunteers

The radical activist and Lincoln Brigade veteran Steve Nelson (1903-1993) declared that “someday, the working class of America will properly acknowledge the role [the] brave Negro Communist played in the fight for freedom,” referring

²² Vaughn Love, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 173.

²³ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 55.

²⁴ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 55.

²⁵ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 82.

²⁶ Oscar Hunter, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 159.

specifically to Oliver Law.²⁷ Before volunteering for Spain, Law had served in the U.S. Army for six years after the Great War. He had then returned to Chicago and become a prominent trade unionist and advocate for the unemployed. According to Berch, his organizing work “resulted in frequent run-ins with the Chicago Police Red Squad and he was once seriously injured by a police beating.”²⁸ Before departing for Spain in 1937, “Law was arrested while leading a protest march against the Italian Fascist invasion of Ethiopia.”²⁹ His pre-war record indicates that he was a capable organizer, unafraid of taking to the streets and confronting the police. He was committed to the cause of the worker, certainly a man who stood out from his peers and destined to lead. Out of the approximately ninety African American volunteers, he was the one selected to command the Lincoln Battalion after other leaders had been wounded or incapacitated.

The fear of capture or going to jail did not deter these men, but they were not common criminals. These outspoken defenders of liberty were surprisingly patriotic. Spanish volunteer Crawford Morgan (1910-1976) saw no difference between the lynching of African Americans in the South and the fascist atrocities taking place across the ocean. He noted that “there are a lot of people in the United States like myself [...] that is going to fight with all we have to see that the Constitution is upheld – those lynchings and the other discrimination – that is a violation of the Constitution.”³⁰ Fellow Lincoln volunteer Albert Chisholm explained that, “when Italy attacked Ethiopia, the majority of Black people wanted to assist the Ethiopians. But the administration of the United States said no.”³¹ What facilitated the transition from talk into action was, once again, the Communist Party. When asked by a party member in 1937 whether he would like to go to Spain, Chisolm said, “Sure, I’d be glad to go.”³² What mattered to him most was an opportunity to fight against these global injustices, whether it be Fascism in Europe or the Jim Crow laws in America. Fellow volunteer Vaughn Love felt the same way. Love was a college-educated Black activist who had been involved in the League of Struggle for Negro Rights and the Southern Labor Committee.³³ Dismayed at the U.S. government for not supporting the Spanish Republic and lacking faith in the progress of the Black and labor movements, Vaughn Love tried “to figure out some kind of way to get to Spain [...] to hell with it – this is the most important thing to me.”³⁴ He left for Spain in February 1937.

²⁷ Quoted in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 5.

²⁸ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 83.

²⁹ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 83.

³⁰ Crawford Morgan, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 179.

³¹ Albert Chisholm, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 147.

³² Albert Chisholm, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 147.

³³ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 85.

³⁴ Vaughn Love, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 173.

Patrick Roosevelt (1903-1982) was another African American volunteer who had defied the odds before coming to Spain, learning how to fly airplanes at a time when Blacks were prohibited from joining the profession. He barnstormed³⁵ all over the country, avoiding the Southern states for obvious reasons. Italy's attack on Ethiopia had infuriated him. In his words, Roosevelt "wanted to see if I could help these little people out against a big war machine."³⁶ Other Black aviators who volunteered for Spain were James Peck (1912-1996) and Paul Williams (1907-1987). Peck explained his reason for going to the *People's World* magazine: "What we were fighting in Spain was a species of that thing which at home had kept me, a trained pilot, grounded while keeping hundreds of thousands of other Negro youths from being what they wanted to be."³⁷ It is remarkable that of the four or five licensed Black pilots in America at that time, three volunteered to go to Spain! On a similar note, Los Angeles native Frank Alexander (1911-1996) explained that the primary reason he wanted to go to Spain was to "fight back" against global injustices. Interestingly, he remarked that "the American people would learn much faster when America became involved in that struggle, that they would wise up to the problems that were here."³⁸ When asked whether he was interested in going, Alexander showed no hesitation, and he left for Spain in February 1937.

Perhaps the most unusual Black volunteer was Salaria Kea (1917-1990), a nurse from Harlem, who went to Spain to help the Republic. Kea was an orphan from Akron, Ohio, who overcame a great deal of adversity and discrimination to earn a nursing degree from the Harlem Hospital Training School in 1934. She befriended other progressive nurses who attended "lectures and discussions on civic affairs, local, national, [and] international."³⁹ This resulted in her active support for the Ethiopians in their cause against the Italians by collecting donations to secure a seventy-five-bed field hospital for Emperor Haile Selassie after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The Ethiopians were defeated in that struggle but, when "Mussolini advanced his Italian troops from Ethiopia into Spain, she understood that this was the same fight."⁴⁰ Kea volunteered to go to Spain with a humanitarian mission headed by Dr. Edward Barsky (1895-1975) from the Beth Israel Hospital in New York City. Her friends from Harlem, surprised at her decision to go into an active war zone protested in astonishment: "What! You're going to Spain in wartime, and alone?" "Sure," Kea said, "I wasn't born twins. I have to go alone."⁴¹

³⁵ Barnstorming was a form of entertainment in which pilots performed aeronautical stunts for audiences on the ground.

³⁶ Patrick Roosevelt, "Testimonies," in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 185.

³⁷ James Peck, "Testimonies," in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 89.

³⁸ Frank Alexander, "Testimonies," in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 142.

³⁹ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 127.

⁴⁰ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 127.

⁴¹ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 69.

V. The Journey Overseas

The voyage to Spain was quite an ordeal. The American Communist Party financed much of the operation, providing each volunteer with a “black cardboard suitcase with a yellow strap, along with other items such as razors, instant coffee and Lucky Strikes cigarettes” – Communist handlers apparently did not consider how conspicuous they all looked traveling with the same suitcase.⁴² They made their way from New York harbor to the French Port of Le Havre, keeping their final destinations a close secret, as it was illegal for Americans to serve in foreign armies. After looking at “suitcases packed with khaki,” customs inspectors at Le Havre quickly figured out their destinations and whispered to each other: “Ils sont volontaires pour l’Espagne.”⁴³ The volunteers then proceeded to do what most tourists do when they arrive in Europe, wandering the town and looking for a hotel and a place to exchange dollars for the local currency. They frequented local bars and wandered into the red-light district where they interacted with working women who, to the Americans’ surprise, “carried union cards.”⁴⁴ Rolfe mentions that they were welcomed by the people, including an accordion player, who asked them to sing American songs while he accompanied them.⁴⁵

The African American volunteers were well received in France. Albert Chisholm remembered that the French “were so human; they acted like they were used to Black people. You could go meet a White girl and just walk down the street. There was nothing to it. Here, you’d get lynched.”⁴⁶ On the train ride to the city of Perpignan on the Spanish border, Rolfe noted that “twenty nationalities had been represented in the train, all, except the Americans, from Europe.”⁴⁷ This is an important observation. Of the approximately 35,000 to 40,000 international volunteers who went to fight in Spain, less than 3,200 were Americans. The rest came from France, Germany, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Austria, and Hungary.⁴⁸ Individuals from all over the world, united in their fight against Fascism, were sharing cigarettes and talking on that train as it was passing the vineyards and rolling hills of the French countryside. According to historian Antony Beevor, “wine was passed round, food shared, and the ‘Internationale’ sung endlessly” on this train ride south.⁴⁹

Crossing the border into Spain itself could be tricky. Albert Chisholm explained that “the French border guards were pro, and some were against us. We

⁴² Caleb Crain, “Lost Illusions: The Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War,” *The New Yorker*, April 11 (online) and 18 (print), 2016.

⁴³ “They are volunteers for Spain.” Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*, 22.

⁴⁴ Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*, 22.

⁴⁵ Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*, 22.

⁴⁶ Albert Chisholm, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 147.

⁴⁷ Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*, 23.

⁴⁸ Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*, 23.

⁴⁹ Beevor, *Battle for Spain*, 160.

were lucky; there were a lot of border guards who saw us, and they just turned their heads away.”⁵⁰ Crossing the Pyrenees was still relatively easy in early 1937 but became harder as the war dragged on and France increased the security along its borders. Many eventually had to hike into Spain over dangerous mountain passes that became snow-clogged during the winter. Harry Haywood was left behind as his group crossed the Pyrenees and “had to spend a night alone with a special guide,” something that brought him much embarrassment.⁵¹ The intellectual Haywood was not a model soldier, despite his previous wartime experience, and he quickly made enemies out of the other volunteers who considered him a dandy with his tailored clothes and knee-high boots.⁵² Even the gracious Rolfe, who knew him personally, dismissed him as a “coward and a shit.”⁵³ American volunteers continued to the border town of Figueres on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees and from there to the Catalan capital of Barcelona.

VI. Jarama Valley

Volunteers arriving in February 1937 were diverted to the town of Albacete in central Spain for additional military training. Since October 1936, Albacete had served as the headquarters and staging area for the International Brigades. By the following year, the situation was dire. The Nationalist Army had crossed the Mediterranean from Morocco and slowly moved up the Peninsula, consolidating their gains as they approached the Spanish capital. They arrived in Madrid on November 6, 1936, and were halted by Republican forces with the help of the recently arrived International Brigades. The Nationalists then laid siege to the city, and both sides dug defensive positions on the outskirts of the capital. The Republican government had already fled to the city of Valencia on the Mediterranean coast. Keeping the vital road between Valencia and Madrid open was essential for supplying the capital. It was here, in the defense of the Jarama Valley just east of Madrid, that the Lincolns would experience their first action.

The fighting on the Jarama Front began on February 6, 1937. Rolfe recorded that “the enemy had attacked with three columns, numbering three thousand men each [...] supported by heavy artillery fire and numerous tanks, they drove the Republican forces back to the edge of the Jarama River.”⁵⁴ The Republican Army and four International Battalions had been fighting a running battle against the Nationalists south of the capital, retreating eastward to avoid being caught in the onslaught. Arriving the night of February 15, the American volunteers were instructed to dig a defensive perimeter and await a possible enemy advance. “In

⁵⁰ Albert Chisolm, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 147.

⁵¹ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 133.

⁵² Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 133.

⁵³ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 133.

⁵⁴ Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*, 37.

their ignorance," Carroll informs us, "they dug against the skyline,"⁵⁵ silhouetting themselves to the enemy on top of a hill. "At dawn, artillery shells and machine-gun bullets smashed into their positions."⁵⁶ Soon, Italian planes were spotted heading toward their line. Oliver Law caught a glimpse of the aircraft and alerted Robert Merriman: "Look boss, they're dropping propaganda leaflets."⁵⁷ When these leaflets turned out to be bombs landing close to their position, Law looked back at Merriman and said, "Them sure was powerful leaflets."⁵⁸

When their position became untenable, the Brigade leadership asked for a detail to dig a new defensive line behind the exposed one. Among the men who volunteered were Oscar Hunter and fellow African American Doug Roach (1909-1938). Hunter remembered "running through a set of olive trees, and we got to a point where we started to dig. Doug and I were both workers, not high school kids, not college boys, but workers and we really dug, see [...] they'd always say when you'd get to the part of the trenches where Doug and Oscar are, be sure and have a ladder, 'cause you're going to have to climb down. It was funny as hell. But we survived and they didn't."⁵⁹

A serious lack of understanding about the tactical situation at Jarama led the 15th International Brigade to order the Lincoln Battalion into several pointless advances that resulted in heavy casualties, including the wounding of Commander Robert Merriman.⁶⁰ The Fascists' advance to cut the road between Valencia and Madrid failed, but the casualties on the Republican side were severe, including 127 Americans killed and almost 200 wounded.⁶¹ The Lincolns manned these trenches for months afterwards, engaging in multiple skirmishes against Nationalist troops. It was during this time that Oliver Law served with particular distinction, being recognized and promoted to group leader in a machine gun company in the Lincoln Battalion. Martin Hourihan (1913-1995), the Lincoln Battalion Commander who replaced Merriman, noted that Law had earned a promotion based on his "good record as officer at [the] front. Showed good morale and discipline under fire."⁶² When Hourihan himself became ill, Law replaced him as Commander of the Lincoln Battalion, making history as the first African American in charge of an integrated unit.

By April 1937, the Nationalist *Generalissimo* Francisco Franco was making significant gains in the Basque region in the country's northeast, threatening the Basque capital of Bilbao. Republican leaders devised a plan to relieve the pressure

⁵⁵ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 99.

⁵⁶ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 99.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 99.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 99.

⁵⁹ Oscar Hunter, "Testimonies," in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 160.

⁶⁰ Landis, *Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 82-85.

⁶¹ Rolfe, *Lincoln Battalion*, 57.

⁶² Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 136.

in that sector by attacking the Nationalists in Extremadura, a region in the country's southwest that borders Portugal. A peculiar incident happened at this juncture. Soviet advisors had openly opposed the Extremadura plan because it took the focus away from the fighting around Madrid. Soviet representatives informed Prime Minister Francisco Largo Caballero's Republican government that "neither their tanks nor their aircraft would support the Extremadura offensive," effectively dooming the venture.⁶³ It was at this point that many Republican officers became aware of the disproportionate Soviet influence at the highest echelons of the Republican Army. According to Beevor, Republican officers "were horrified by the Party's infiltration of the command structure and its vitriolic campaigns against any officer who resisted."⁶⁴ The upcoming offensive would take place near Madrid. As Beevor explains, due to propaganda purposes, the Soviets were "as obsessed with the capital as Franco had been over the previous six months."⁶⁵ Thus, the Soviets were essentially in control of strategy, and their assistance would come at a cost.

The International Brigades were pushed to their absolute limits during the offensive that followed at Brunete (west of Madrid). The overwhelming combination of Germany's Condor Legion and Italian and Moroccan infantry tilted the scales in favor of the Nationalists. The disparity in modern weaponry between the two combatant armies was taking its toll on the International Brigades, and without proper resupply, there was only one way the war would end. Watching the Condor Legion's non-stop aerial bombardments, Lincoln volunteer Morris Mickenberg (1908-1960) observed that "the Fascists had everything and we had nothing [...] we never had a chance, we lost this war long ago."⁶⁶ The International Brigades attempted to stem the tide by carrying out desperate frontal attacks that had little chance of succeeding. During one such attack conducted on the morning of July 9, 1937, Oliver Law advanced ahead of his men, waving a pistol and urging them forward."⁶⁷ Several eyewitnesses confirmed what happened next, as "Oliver Law was dropped by a fascist bullet to the chest."⁶⁸

As Carroll points out, not all the Lincolns agreed with this version of events. Carroll mentions a lamentable account made by a fellow volunteer by the name of William Herrick (1915-2004), who published a controversial version of what had happened at Brunete. Although he was not an eyewitness, Herrick recalled that "one of the disgruntled Lincolns, angry and frightened by Law's incompetence,

⁶³ Beevor, *Battle for Spain*, 274.

⁶⁴ Beevor, *Battle for Spain*, 275.

⁶⁵ Beevor, *Battle for Spain*, 274.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 142.

⁶⁷ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 142.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 142.

fired the bullet that killed him [...] subsequently urinating on his corpse.”⁶⁹ Firsthand witnesses fervently denied this outrageous story, but it was not the only account of the potential ineptitude of the Black commander. Law was rumored to have been completely out of his depth before being killed at a place known as Mosquito Ridge. Carroll quotes another Lincoln officer who insisted on remaining anonymous and stated that “Law was cowardly at Brunete, he was completely inexperienced.”⁷⁰ Volunteer Morris Mickenberg collaborates this, calling Law an “incompetent commander,” and hinting that there might have been something to the charges made against him.⁷¹ Experience leading labor strikes and protests does not directly translate into leading men in battle. What training Law did have was six years in a segregated Army that strongly discouraged African American leadership. West Point cadets who undergo four years of formal leadership training have been known to fail in the heat of battle, and Oliver Law had no such advantage. One should not criticize him too harshly. The extraordinary circumstances of combat bring out the best and worst in people. Oliver Law may have found himself overwhelmed by his responsibilities, but he stayed loyal to the cause and made a valiant effort to lead his troops to victory until the very end.

Fellow African American combatant Walter Garland (1913-1974) was also injured at Brunete and had to be evacuated to a nearby field hospital. The Lincolns were decimated at Brunete, and the strategic objective of saving the Basque capital failed as well. Republican leadership adopted the strategy of maintaining offensive operations to shift the focus away from Madrid, and Franco and his allies obliged, defeating these attacks, which unnecessarily prolonged the war, wherever they materialized. The Republic continued these futile attacks until the very end, a questionable strategy given the risks involved in offensive operations. Perhaps they would have done much better had they maintained a defensive posture, but the Republican leadership did not adopt this course of action and would continue its costly advances until its armies disintegrated at the Battle of the Ebro River. The International Brigades would pay dearly for these decisions.

It is no small irony that, during these battles, African Americans were often facing fellow Africans in the form of the Rif tribesmen serving in the Nationalist Army.⁷² The Nationalists had recruited these Moroccans to fight against the Spanish Republic. Berch mentions that “Loyalist propaganda directed at North African troops was so venomous that it was interpreted as racism pure and simple.”⁷³ Republican troops were even known to fire at the African American volunteers in the mistaken belief that they were Moors (the label commonly used

⁶⁹ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 138.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 138.

⁷¹ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 138.

⁷² Rif tribesmen were ethnic Berbers who adopted Islam in the seventh Century during the Arab expansion into North Africa.

⁷³ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 32.

for the Rif tribesmen).⁷⁴ African Americans may have gone to Spain to support a progressive movement that looked beyond racial differences, but there certainly remained some deeply ingrained racial prejudices that even motivated one Spanish peasant to look at Black volunteer Vaughn Love and exclaim, “los esclavos!”⁷⁵ Despite this confusion, there is no question that African Americans were treated better in Spain than in their native country, as veteran Crawford Morgan informed the Subversive Activities Control Board in 1954. Morgan testified that “from the time I arrived in Spain until the time I left, I felt like a human being, like a man. People didn’t look at me with hatred in their eyes because I was Black [...] when you have been in the world for quite a long time and have been treated worse than people treat their dogs, it is quite a nice feeling to go someplace and feel like a human being.”⁷⁶

African American volunteers continued to fight in Spain until the Spanish government, in 1938, decided to send the International Brigades home, in the hope that the Nationalists would follow suit. They were present at Quinto, Belchite, Teruel, and at the Ebro, distinguishing themselves along the way. Eluard McDaniels (1912-1985) became so proficient at lobbing grenades at the enemy that the Spanish soldiers nicknamed him “el fantastico” for his athletic prowess.⁷⁷ Claude Pringle (1894-1959) not only survived the sinking of the ship *Ciudad de Barcelona* off the coast of Malgrat de Mar, he was also “decorated as a loyal, well-disciplined soldier of the Spanish People’s Army” for his actions at Teruel in 1938.⁷⁸ The Lincolns and most international volunteers departed Spain in October 1938, but their struggles were far from over. Some African American volunteers would find themselves in the segregated American military during World War II. After they had proved themselves as able combatants in the Spanish Civil War, this was a major blow.

Official American indifference to the Lincolns would turn into open hostility during the Cold War years. Veterans established support groups such as the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB). This group continued to advocate against Franco at home in the U.S., which became a problem at the end of World War II when Franco was redesigning his image as the first Cold Warrior against Bolshevism. *Realpolitik* prevailed, and Spain eagerly joined the anti-Communist alliance that included much of Western Europe. By 1950, the State Department even authorized “a sizable loan to the Franco government.”⁷⁹ African American volunteers suffered along with the rest of the Lincolns. The FBI visited

⁷⁴ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 32.

⁷⁵ “The slaves!” Vaughn Love, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 85.

⁷⁶ Crawford Morgan, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 176.

⁷⁷ “The fantastic.” Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 86.

⁷⁸ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 89.

⁷⁹ Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 293.

them at their places of employment, oftentimes resulting in a prompt dismissal. Many struggled to find work. The Truman administration officially declared the VALB a “subversive” organization, and more calamities soon followed, including arrests, trials, and the loss of employment for some of the Black Lincolns. Eluard McDaniels was fired from the Coast Guard after his service with the Lincolns was discovered. He believed himself a victim of both racial and political discrimination, as he considered the Coast Guard policy “not just political, but more racial discrimination than anything else.”⁸⁰ African American labor unionist and civil rights activist Asa Philip Randolph aptly characterized this predicament when he said that “negroes cannot afford to add to the handicap of being Black [...] the handicap of being Red.”⁸¹ Service in the Spanish Civil War resulted in significant adversity for veterans, especially Black veterans, after the war.

Conclusion

African Americans went to Spain to fight against the same injustices they were facing at home. They could not accept an attitude of non-intervention at a time when Black liberties were being trampled in both Ethiopia and the American South. Picking up a gun and standing up against every American Southerner was out of the question, but when the opportunity presented itself to oppose that same intolerant ideology in the context of a legitimate struggle in Europe, they took it. They recognized European Fascism as the xenophobic ideology that it was. It hardly mattered to them that the Communists were financing their voyage to Spain. To them, alliances of convenience in the spirit of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” was a strategic necessity, and the United States itself would become an ally of the Soviet Union during World War II. Despite repeated instances of racial prejudice and violence, no African American volunteer regretted his service in the Spanish Civil War. Berch notes that “not one single Black Lincoln veteran who was brought before the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) or the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) turned informant.”⁸² Both committees had been set up to investigate potential Communist activities in the U.S. during the McCarty era. Having volunteered for Spain, many Lincolns fell victim to this dragnet that could often ruin lives. Speaking long after the war, Admiral Kilpatrick remained proud of his service in Spain. Other Black Lincoln veterans shared his sentiments when he expressed that “I don’t have to have no damn praise or be remembered by anybody about going to Spain. I’d go today [...] I was doing it because I was a member of the movement that believes in that type of struggle. That’s it.”⁸³ And that’s what it was. African Americans went to fight

⁸⁰ Quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 311.

⁸¹ Quoted in Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 40.

⁸² Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 43.

⁸³ Admiral Kilpatrick, “Testimonies,” in Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 168.

in Spain for their liberation, their own sense of freedom. The courageous actions of these soldiers overseas would go on to influence African American youth at home – perhaps even a particular twelve-year-old boy from Harlem, who wrote his earliest essay on the Spanish Revolution, and who went on to become one of the most prominent figures in the ongoing battle for Black and gay liberation: his name was James Arthur Baldwin.⁸⁴

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⁸⁴ Berch, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, 43.