

A Peculiar Fate: American Press Coverage of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

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This paper was written for the course “The United States in World War II” offered Fall 2011 in order to complete a requirement for the History Major at Oberlin College.

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By the mid-1930s, the First World War and the Great Depression had thrown the United States into political turmoil and radical political parties were gaining popularity. When, in 1936, Generalissimo Francisco Franco attempted to overthrow the legally elected Republican government of Spain, sympathetic Americans, organized into a unit called the “Abraham Lincoln Brigade,” volunteered to fight against Franco in order to protect liberal values abroad. American newspapers coverage of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade reveals the domestic and foreign policy debates which arose in the late 1930s and continued into the late 1950s.

The Spanish Civil War is often described as the ‘testing ground for World War II,’ as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy sent new weapons of war to support the Spanish National leader Generalissimo Francisco Franco, while the Soviet Union sent equipment, spies, and advisors to bolster the Spanish Republic. However, an examination of the coverage of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion during the Spanish Civil War by American newspapers reveals another ‘testing ground’ which occurred not in Spain, but in the United States. A ‘testing ground’ that involved radical ideologies and policies rather than experimental planes and panzers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, newspapers of every political leaning throughout America paid keen attention to the approximately 3,000 men who defied their government and put their lives in danger to fight in a European war.<sup>2</sup> As the war progressed, the media usurped the stories of these men transforming them into a device to further the public debate over isolationism and interventionism, the liberalization and racial integration of the military, and the growing radicalization of world politics. Indeed, an examination of left-leaning papers, in particular the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and an assortment of conservative sources shows the ways in which the Spanish Civil War became an ideological ‘testing ground’ within the United States and how it influenced American foreign and domestic

policies from the late 1930s through the 1950s and beyond.

American newspapers quickly recognized the importance of Franco's coup, however it was not until Americans began to volunteer that a heightened interest in the conflict arose. In July 1936, a disgruntled group of conservative Spanish officers and soldiers under Generalissimo Francisco Franco, upset by a series of liberal reforms, attempted to overthrow the legally elected Popular Front government. Spain quickly divided into two major blocs.<sup>3</sup> Those who supported the liberal government were called the Republicans or the Loyalists. Those who supported Franco's conservative coup were called the Nationalists or the Fascists. Foreign governments quickly rushed to join one side or the other. Mussolini and Adolf Hitler recognized the opportunity to test their new armies and equipment while supporting a fellow fascist. The Soviet Union sent aid to the Republic to fight the spread of fascism and to protect Spain's leftist government. Individuals from around the world volunteered to take up arms for the Spanish Republic, eventually consolidating into the famous International Brigades.<sup>4</sup> According to an estimate by the historian Antony Beevor, "between 32,000 and 35,000 men from 53 different countries" served in the International Brigades.<sup>5</sup>

Approximately 3,000 Americans eventually served with the International Brigades. The first group of 95 'secret' American volunteers set sail from New York City on 26 December 1936 aboard the *S.S. Normandie*.<sup>6</sup> Local Communist Committee members from the border between France and Spain aided the volunteers' transportation to the Spanish border. They then found their own way to Albacete, the headquarters of the XVth International Brigade and the birthplace of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.<sup>7</sup>

Conservative circles were concerned that many of the men volunteering to fight were

Communists and they wanted to prevent the militarization of their political opponents. Along with the isolationists, who wanted to embed isolationism into American foreign policy, they pressured Congress into passing the Neutrality Act in May 1937. This act banned American volunteers from fighting in foreign conflicts. If the President so desired, any American caught fighting overseas for a foreign power could have their citizenship revoked. Yet in spite of the Neutrality Act men continued to volunteer, and the Abraham Lincoln Battalion quickly gained a reputation of being one of the best Republican units on the battlefield. Throughout 1937 and 1938, the Lincolns fought as shock troops in many of the hardest-fought battles, often suffering extremely high casualties.

The *Cleveland Plain Dealer's* coverage of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade between July and December 1937 clearly delineates the sources of pro-Loyalist sympathies in the United States.<sup>8</sup> At that time, Cleveland had a large population of industrial workers and first- and second-generation immigrants. These two groups traditionally held strong leftist sympathies. According to the 1930 census, forty percent of those employed in Cleveland worked in industry or manufacturing compared to just 29 percent nationwide.<sup>9</sup> These industrial workers bitterly remembered the violence against workers in the union battles of the 1930s, and believed that the Fascist forces in Spain “were the same ‘reactionary’ ones that had fought unionization in the United States.”<sup>10</sup> Cleveland also had an unusually large population of foreign-born whites, particularly from Eastern Europe. According to the 1930 Census, “foreign born whites” composed a fourth of Cleveland’s residences compared to only twelve percent nationwide.<sup>11</sup> Eastern European immigrants often came to America with leftist ‘Old World’ values, and many saw the rise of fascism as a threat to these values, as well as a threat their friends and family

remaining in the 'Old World.' Cleveland's unusually high proportions of these two left-leaning populations correlates to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer's* obvious bias towards the Spanish Republicans and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Columns published before late August 1937 focused on the peculiarly liberal nature of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and how different this conflict was from World War One. On 26 July 1937, articles on the second page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* emphasized how successful American volunteers proved to be in holding back Franco's Fascists, as well as the unique structure of the International Brigades. One article tells how an American became the commander of the Italian Garibaldi Brigade. The other article reported how "in Spain . . . officers lead the men into action, facing fire first."<sup>12</sup> Major Robert Merriman, the commander, and one of the founding members of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, insisted on personally leading his troops into action.<sup>13</sup> This is in direct contrast to the hated 'armchair generals' of the First World War. These articles illustrate the new 'democratized' fighting style of the International Brigades. Officers and men faced the same dangers in every battle, and commanders did everything in their power to minimize casualties.

Another *Plain Dealer* article published on 26 July 1937, described the role of each unit's political commissar. According to this article, soldiers during the First World War complained that they "never [knew] what [they were] expected to do" on the battlefield or why it mattered.<sup>14</sup> Morale suffered as the soldiers did not understand how their battle would further the general objectives of the war. Political commissars solved this problem by outlining the objectives and difficulties expected in each coming battle.<sup>15</sup> For the first time in modern military history, every soldier knew the significance of his mission, politically and strategically, and why he should risk

his life for it. Commissars also supposedly forced generals to provide sufficient reasons for why their soldiers should sacrifice themselves for their purposed objectives. By emphasizing the ‘democratization of the battlefield’ and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade’s efforts to avoid unnecessary casualties on the battlefield, this article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* offers a response to the isolationists’ argument that the United States should not be involved in foreign wars as it would result in American lives being senselessly thrown away.

The ‘democratization of the battlefield’ also meant that throughout the Spanish Civil War, nonwhite members of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion served as equals alongside their white comrades. Although it is not known exactly how many blacks ever served in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, it is thought that around 50 black men served at some point during the conflict. The International Brigades were strongly influenced by the Communist Party which emphasized the importance of complete equality between all races and ranks. During this time, the United States armed forces were racially segregated. However, this policy had begun to be challenged by both African-Americans and liberals. Newspaper articles noted that many black volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade saw the war as a “fight to save all racial and minority groups from extinction at the hands of the fascist bandits.”<sup>16</sup> They also saw it as a way to fight against racial oppression in their own country as their military exploits would show that blacks could fight just as well as whites. For some, in an era when the lynching of blacks in the southern United States was not unheard of, going to Spain to fight was also a form of empowerment and escape.<sup>17</sup>

The Abraham Lincoln Battalion provided an equality among races that was not found in the United States at the time. American newspaper reports of black volunteers fighting

alongside, and even leading, their white comrades sparked a conversation about the legitimacy of the American military's policy of racial segregation. In the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, an article about Lincoln Brigade volunteer Sterling Rochester, who returned to Cleveland in August 1937, spends four paragraphs describing his exploits at the front. Only then does it mention that he is black. The article then goes on to talk about how "Hawaiians, Filipinos, and naturalized Japanese" fought alongside white soldiers to defend the Spanish Republic.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in a tribute in the *Negro Star* to Douglas Roach, an African-American volunteer who died of grenade wounds in April 1938, a white American volunteer named Robert Raven said, "Roach was one of the best machine gunners in the entire Spanish War. . . . He was an army by himself--He had an unbeatable spirit. No matter how dark things were, he was happy and would make the rest of us happy."<sup>19</sup> Another article in the *Plain Dealer* from 26 December 1937 talks about the death of Oliver Law, the first black American to ever command a predominantly white American unit. Oddly, it does not even mention his race.<sup>20</sup> It is impossible to tell if this omission is intentional or not. However, it is fitting that his race is minimized given the lack of importance the Abraham Lincoln Brigade placed on it. These kinds of articles lend support to the idea that black soldiers could fight just as effectively as white soldiers.

Unfortunately, the argument over racial segregation in the military would remain unresolved until Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 in 1948 which desegregated the American military.<sup>21</sup>

American men volunteered to fight in Spain for many different reasons. In the first half of 1937, individuals with idealistic leftist tendencies could find ample reasons to volunteer in their local papers. Many left-leaning papers focused on the atrocities committed by Franco's

troops. For example, a column in the *Plain Dealer* entitled “Letters of Ex-Student at O.S.U. Tell of Army Life on Spanish Front” used excerpts of a letter written by Samuel Levinger to describe the horrors of aerial bombardment. Levinger wrote that although the bombs caused no combatant casualties, the shrapnel killed a “little girl [that he] had seen playing near” his unit.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, virtually all articles published in the *Plain Dealer* between late July and early August 1937 stressed the importance of American volunteers and the volunteers’ “utmost confidence in the ultimate victory of [the Republican] cause.”<sup>23</sup> What the *Plain Dealer* and other leftist papers failed to report was that the Republican forces suffered from a lack of supplies and manpower seriously jeopardizing their chances for victory.

Not all readers of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* supported American involvement in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>24</sup> For example, a letter written by Ernest W. Becker referred to the article about Samuel Levinger as “insidious propaganda.”<sup>25</sup> Becker maintained that “good Americans are not going about the world seeking another war in order to satisfy selfish foreign interest.”<sup>26</sup> He, like many conservatives, believed that it was immoral to become involved in another European conflict.

Conservative newspapers throughout America supported Becker’s isolationist standpoint, and favored Franco’s fascist movement. While left-leaning papers focused on the justice of the Republican cause, right-leaning papers focused on the growing number of American casualties and the likelihood of the Republican forces’ collapse. An article on 12 March 1937 in the Oklahoman *Miami News-Record* bore the headline “Many Casualties Reported Among American Volunteer Battalion in Spain: Californian, its Commander, is Gravely Yhurt [sic].”<sup>27</sup> It focused on the high casualties suffered by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a group of ‘foolhardy idealists,’



during the Battle of Jarama. The article also described the hardships and abuses two volunteers suffered at the hands of the Spanish Republic, and bemoaned the fact that men as highly educated as the commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Robert Merriman, were squandering their time and lives in Spain.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, many conservatives and isolationists focused on the ‘pointless’ waste of America’s elite in Spain. Later, they would make the same argument when faced with the possibility of sending American aid to the United Kingdom during the Second World War.

Starting in the summer of 1937, the devastating number of American casualties began to wear away the initial optimism and enthusiasm of even the left-leaning press. In late July 1937, the Abraham Lincoln Battalion fought its second major battle. It successfully assaulted entrenched Nationalist positions at Brunete, only to be forced to retreat shortly thereafter. By the end of this battle, they had suffered 50 percent casualties.<sup>29</sup> As news of this battle trickled back to the United States, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*’s tone began to deviate from its previous optimism. Though still supportive of the Republican cause, the realities of the Spanish Civil War had lessened its support for sending Americans to fight in Spain. However, even as it started to introduce a critical note into its coverage, it continued to advertise the admirable qualities of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade such as the rapid promotion of common soldiers and the racial equality found in its ranks.<sup>30</sup>

On 20 August 1937, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* ran a front-page article about “a Cleveland youth who challenged death for the sake of an ideal [but who was almost executed] on charges of desertion.”<sup>31</sup> Vachel Lindsay Blair, a 22-year-old Western Reserve University student and a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, was rescued by an American council. In a series

of telegrams and letters to his mother, he tells how American sacrifice “seems too big when you are defending that great amorous form called the Spanish republic, . . . living in fox holes and eating nothing but bread and marmalade” for four months.<sup>32</sup> His mother, though she wanted “the Loyalists to win--decidedly,” wished that “no more Americans would go over.”<sup>33</sup> One of the reasons she gave for this is that she had read in the *Plain Dealer* that “Spaniards could be seen drinking wine and frolicking in the cafes” instead of fighting alongside the American volunteers.<sup>34</sup> In the article, Blair says “and there they are, fine, superior Americans, being dumped into a giant rat trap and seemingly no advantage to the cause of democracy.”<sup>35</sup> He claimed that “most of the Americans in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion were wiped out.”<sup>36</sup> This was particularly upsetting for him, given that “more than half of the Americans have college degrees” and some even had master’s degrees.<sup>37</sup> Until this time, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* had clearly supported interventionism. However, by placing this article on the front page, it revealed a waning of their support for American intervention.

This did not mean that the *Plain Dealer* decreased its support for the Republic. It continued to publish articles supporting the fight against Spanish Fascism. However, the number of articles about the Abraham Lincoln Brigade declined after August 1937. This may be correlated to the decreasing number of volunteers from Cleveland, but it may have also resulted from the increase in American casualties and Republican defeats. This pattern of initial support followed by disillusionment as casualties mounted can also be seen in the articles by Ernest Hemingway between August 1937 and the end of the war. Indeed, like the *Plain Dealer*, Hemingway eventually tried to dissuade Americans from volunteering.<sup>38</sup>

In mid-1938, the looming defeat of the Spanish Republic and the summary execution of

foreign prisoners of war by Franco's forces led to the decision by the Republic to send the International Brigades home. By December, virtually all American volunteers had returned to the United States. The last group returned on the same *S.S. Normandie* that had taken the first volunteers to Europe two years earlier. Although the Abraham Lincoln Brigade failed to help preserve the Spanish Republic, its existence created a number of long-lasting legacies at home. For decades after the war, due to their perceived connections to the Communist Party, most American veterans faced harassment by their own government. Some veterans did remain firm communists all their lives and were founding members of the American Civil Rights Movement.<sup>39</sup>

Although the government never used the 1937 Neutrality Act to take away any American's citizenship, the FBI exploited the law to harass returning soldiers. In February 1940, well before the start of the McCarthy's Red Scare, at 5 AM, the FBI raided the apartments of a dozen Lincoln veterans living in Detroit. The FBI claimed that they were illegally "recruiting for foreign armies" even though the Spanish Civil War had been over for months.<sup>40</sup> These men were jailed for eleven days and not allowed to exercise their Constitutional right to contact a lawyer. They were released only after a direct order from Attorney General Robert Jackson. It is unclear whether the FBI did this to scare suspected communists into submission or to advance the career of a government official.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, the FBI went on to harass returning black soldiers too. It was feared that black soldiers returning from Spain would use their weapon training and newfound sense of equality to incite disaffection and violence at home.

Even during the Second World War, conservatives argued that these 'communist' Lincoln veterans were 'blood-thirsty sadists' who were unreliable. Conservative columnist Westbrook

Pegler maintained that they should be closely watched, and even have their political rights restricted.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the American military refused to promote anyone who had fought in Spain, and did everything in its power to keep them stateside. Indeed, one black flying ace who applied to the Tuskegee flying school was turned down for ‘lack of experience.’ Later, during the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy had many members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade arrested or blacklisted under suspicion of holding ‘communist sympathies.’

Unlike Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the United States did not approach the Spanish Civil War as a ‘testing ground’ for future military conflicts. Indeed, the ideological ‘testing ground’ that arose from American involvement in the Spanish Civil War was of a different sort. Foreign and domestic policies, rather than planes and panzers, were pitted against each other. Much of this conflict was fought in the newspapers throughout America. It was not until the end of the Spanish Civil War that the ideological battles became concrete. The ideological underpinnings of American involvement in World War II and the Civil Rights Movement can readily be understood through the examination of press coverage of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Although the tone of this coverage changed with the results of the fighting in Spain, it brought to the forefront of public consciousness issues that would not be resolved for decades to come. It is unfortunate that 73 years after the end of the Spanish Civil War, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and all of its experiences have been largely forgotten by the American public. The dangers of today’s political extremism which is fed partly by the massive amounts of biased information found on the internet and ideologically motivated news outlets can be further understood by examining the media coverage of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade which clearly reveals how powerfully the media can influence public perceptions of contemporary events. The

ideological battles of today may be different from those fought during the 1930s but the roots of these conflicts can easily be found in the American 'testing ground' of the Spanish Civil War.



Figure 1-Battles of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion

<http://www.alba-valb.org/resources/robesson/spanish-civil-war-history/Spain.jpg>

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<sup>1</sup> Synonymous to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

<sup>2</sup> The 1937 Neutrality Act explicitly banned American citizens' participation in the Spanish Civil War

<sup>3</sup> Though these two blocs were composed of many conflicting factions that occasionally fought each other, particularly on the Republican side.

<sup>4</sup> Some foreign individuals also fought for Franco, though in much fewer numbers.

<sup>5</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 157.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 89.

<sup>7</sup> Don Lawson, *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans Fighting Fascism in the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1989), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 100.

<sup>9</sup> United States of America. United States Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1931.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 101.

<sup>11</sup> United States of America. United States Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1931.

<sup>12</sup> Spencer D. Irwin, "Garibaldi Brigade Leader Confident," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), July 26, 1937.

<sup>13</sup> Don Lawson, *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans Fighting Fascism in the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1989), 43.

<sup>14</sup> Spencer D. Irwin, "Garibaldi Brigade Leader Confident," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), July 26, 1937.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> "Best Gunner and the Loyal Hearted," *The Negro Star* (Wichita, KS), April 29, 1938.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> "Spanish Defender Describes Front," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), August 14, 1937.

<sup>19</sup> "Best Gunner and the Loyal Hearted," *The Negro Star* (Wichita, KS), April 29, 1938.

<sup>20</sup> "American Officer in Spain to Talk," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), December 26, 1937.

<sup>21</sup> *Executive Order 9981*, July 26, 1948; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

<sup>22</sup> "Letters of Ex-Student at O.S.U. Tell of Army Life on Spanish Front," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), August 1, 1937.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39, 99.

<sup>25</sup> Ernest W. Becker "War 'Propaganda,'" *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), August 5, 1937.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> "Many Casualties Reported Among American Volunteer Battalion in Spain," *Miami News-Record* (Miami, OK), March 12, 1937.

<sup>28</sup> Merriman had attended the University of Nevada on a ROTC scholarship, later becoming a professor of Economics at the University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>29</sup> Don Lawson, *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans Fighting Fascism in the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1989), 72.

<sup>30</sup> "American Officer in Spain to Talk," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), December 26, 1937.

<sup>31</sup> "Shaker Youth, Saved From Spanish Firing Squad by Consul, Is on Way Home," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), August 20, 1937.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 100.

<sup>39</sup> Danny Duncan Collum, *"This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do:" African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*. (Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), 42-43.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 230-1.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Westbrook Pegler, "U.S. Boys Sacrificed in Spanish War Red Brigade," *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio TX), August 8, 1945.

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