

A Revolution in Romanticism:

The Shift in Fervor within the International Brigades and the Anarcho-Syndicalists throughout the Spanish Civil War

By Liam Doyle and Raphael Wood

When the Spanish Civil War broke out, leftists who identified with a wide variety of radical ideologies defended the Republic. Anarcho-syndicalists were particularly important to the Popular Front coalition and the republican war effort. Not only did peasant and proletariat anarchist collectives control much of the Republic's wartime economy, but their militias also played a significant role in fighting Falangist forces all along the front. They were joined by foreigners, mostly communists, who enlisted to serve in the International Brigades. These volunteers came from different countries for different reasons, but, even if their effect on the outcome of the war was ultimately negligible, they fought out of a sense of moral duty that inspired both the Republic and the rest of the world. Members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists were romantic idealists, but the degree to which they abided to their respective ideologies differed immensely. In part due to the diversity of their movements as well as their role as foreigners, the International Brigades were able to sacrifice ideological conformity in order to produce the unified coalition that the more doctrinaire anarcho-syndicalists lacked, which ultimately allowed the legacy of groups like the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to survive the Spanish Civil War.

Although the main reason many International brigaders entered the war was to combat Fascism in the hopes of upholding far-left ideologies and defending democracy, many foreign volunteers voiced a variety of other reasons for signing up to fight. Women like Evelyn Hutchins went to Spain to fight for feminist ideals. She was well aware of Benito Mussolini asserting, and often enacting, doctrines that repressed the personal liberties of women—for example that they should be forced to wear long-sleeved dresses that went to their ankles, or that they should be limited to the domestic sphere.¹ Though she admitted being acquainted with Marxist ideologies, she fought fascism largely because it was a safe haven

¹ "Evelyn Hutchins Interview," interview, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, 12.

for misogynistic beliefs.² Many African-Americans went to fight in Spain to advance the rights of blacks all over the world. The famous Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who was also attracted to communism, described the Spanish Civil War as a proxy for the fight against European colonization in Africa as well as the fight for African-American civil rights back in the United States.³ He made these aims explicit in his poems and letters, in which he did not always emphasize the war's significance through upholding communism, or even democracy or liberalism.⁴ Obviously, Hughes' motivations were numerous, but his diction makes it clear that expanding the rights of blacks was foremost in his mind – and presumably those of many African-American brigaders as well. Hyman Katz, a Rabbi and member of the United States Communist Party, also ostensibly entered the war to protect the now jeopardized leftist movements in the Western world; however, he revealed more personal motives for entering the war in his letters to his mother.⁵ One letter, in particular, alludes to his underlying reasons for fighting fascism in Spain; in it he fails to mention any adherence to the protection of communism or democracy, but instead directs his grievances towards the antisemitism of Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini.⁶ The fight for him – and presumably many other Jews – had less to do with communism than with the fate of Judaism. This variety of motives allowed the cause of the International Brigades to be a more inclusive movement, which immunized it against the dangers of ideological intransigence and rigidity.

The strains of romanticism in the anarcho-syndicalist movement were directly inherited from its ideological predecessors. Inspired by the works and speeches of Mikhail Bakunin and Giuseppe Fanelli and catalyzed by destitution prevalent throughout the country, the movement had a deep historical foundation within the Spanish working class.⁷ The anarchist theory was predicated on the Marxist belief

² Ibid, 11.

³ Jabari Asim, "The Politics and Poetry of Langston Hughes," June 7, 2004, The Washington Post, accessed June 25, 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A21849-2004Jun7.html>; Langston Hughes, "Letter from Spain," letter, November, 1937, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hyman Katz, "Hyman Katz to Mother," letter, November 25, 1937, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Eddie Conlon, *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action* (Dublin: Worker's Solidarity Movement, 1984), 2.

that parliamentary activity and subsequent reform was useless.⁸ Anarchists in Spain favored social revolution by way of unbridled class conflict, often in the form of terrorism.⁹ The syndicalists, whose ideology was largely inherited from the works of Georges Sorel, counted on the unification of the working class and a subsequent general strike to emancipate the Spanish proletariat.¹⁰ This even more agonistic form of the Marxist dialectic as well as the utopian dreams of proletariat unification that anarcho-syndicalism inherited from the anarchists and syndicalists were innately romantic. Indeed, this idealistic quality was manifested in their heroic – if somewhat quixotic – revolutionary undertakings. During the Asturian mining strikes in October of 1934, a series of unified mining communities – composed mainly of the UGT, anarcho-syndicalists, Communists, and Trotskyites – rose up in solidarity to take control of towns such as Mieres and Oviedo.¹¹ Superior government forces eventually came to retake the towns, and yet many poorly armed anarcho-syndicalist miners refused to submit, fighting to the death and drawing the conflict out for weeks.¹²

The International Brigades also revealed a romantic quality in their fight against the Falangists. This romanticism took a variety of forms – sometimes communicated through a love of Spanish women, the working class, or the land itself.¹³ Alvah Bessie, a soldier in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, was taken by the great beauty of the Spanish countryside in particular.¹⁴ Despite writing on the front lines, Bessie was so enamored by the small parochial towns that he not only described one explicitly, but sketched it in his journal.¹⁵ Although a small and likely subliminal detail, he explicitly noted the beauty of a manor and

⁸ R. R. Palmer, Joel Colton, and Lloyd S. Kramer, *A History of Europe in the Modern World* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 562.

⁹ Eddie Conlon, *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action* (Dublin: Worker's Solidarity Movement, 1984), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War 1931-39* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1967), 154.

¹² Ibid, 155.

¹³ Ben Iceland, "The Big Retreat," *The Volunteer*. February, 1987, 2; Alvah Bessie, "Alvah Bessie Diary," diary, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, accessed May 10, 2017, 13; Jack White, "A Rebel in Barcelona: Jack White's first Spanish impressions," November, 11, 1936, 1, http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/jw_first.html.

¹⁴ Alvah Bessie, "Alvah Bessie Diary," diary, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, accessed May 10, 2017, 13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

church.¹⁶ These were the very reactionary institutions – churches with their clerics and manors with their lords – that he, a communist, should hope to destroy. Bessie even took the time to cite the “red soil” of the land as being beautiful.¹⁷ He, like many other brigaders, was so infatuated with Spain in its struggle against fascism that he found even the most basic features of the country worthy of reminiscence. Jack White, a member of the British intelligentsia, expressed his zeal for the anarchist life through a short but revealing anecdote about leaving his coat filled with £ 80 on the side of a road and feeling secure that the fraternal character of Barcelona’s working class would leave it safe from theft.¹⁸ In fact, he was so taken by these Spaniards that he was willing to overlook some of their malicious acts; he acknowledged the burnt-out churches all over the city, but noted that they now served as medical facilities.¹⁹ He went so far as to say that these buildings were no longer “based on the love of God,” but instead “on brotherliness, selflessness and self-respect.”²⁰ The reality is that many of these churches were sacked, and their respective clergymen killed, in acts of mob violence that left thousands of clerics dead by the end of the war.²¹ White justifies this desecration with quintessentially romantic diction by citing the rights of this wrong. Obviously he was a man of moral character – he came to Spain to save lives as a doctor in the Red Cross, but he was so enamored by the Spanish proletariat and their fight against their oppressors that he was blind to the more iniquitous realities of the movement.²²

For International brigaders, the variety of motivations and their romantic attachment to the cause and country helped unite the movement as a whole. In the United States various far-left factions were contemptuous of each other. As Evelyn Hutchins recalled from the time she was attending night school in America, students of different leftist political ideologies hated each other, even though – to her – they

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jack White, “A Rebel in Barcelona: Jack White’s first Spanish impressions,” November, 11, 1936, 1, http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/jw_first.html.

¹⁹ Ibid, 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War 1931-39* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1967), 280.

²² Jack White, “A Rebel in Barcelona: Jack White’s first Spanish impressions,” November, 11, 1936, 1, http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/jw_first.html.

were all essentially arguing the same thing.²³ This was not the case for the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. This detail is made clear in Ben Iceland's account of a fellow brigader named Eliot whom he encountered during the Catalonian Offensive.²⁴ Iceland was a member of the American Labor Party, a prominent group in the American socialist movement.²⁵ He was quick to point out that Eliot was a cold, humorless communist, yet he regarded his fellow brigader as one of the bravest and most dedicated men he had ever met.²⁶ His quickness in noting Eliot's political affiliation is proof that he was conscious of their differences, and yet he respected him still. Though Iceland epitomized the type of fervent leftist that Hutchins described back in the United States, he respected Eliot as a soldier and fellow bastion of the International Brigades' cause. Although no doubt partially a byproduct of camaraderie amid hardship, this detail is nonetheless an indication that this movement transcended ideological differences, in stark contrast to the entrenched ideals of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists.

Despite the romanticism within Spain's anarcho-syndicalist movement, its stringent agenda, grounded in historical roots and survival, threw it into direct conflict with other political groups, and contributed to its collapse. By adhering to the notion of social revolution in more than just a metaphorical sense, the movement was forced to combat the communists of the republic, who had a conflicting interpretation of the Marxist dialectic.²⁷ The anarcho-syndicalists collectivized land en masse, created bread lines for the poor, and instituted policies providing education and healthcare to families of the workforce.²⁸ The communists worked against these efforts, and although they did not have the influence to prevent anarcho-syndicalist collectivization early in the war, the dispute the anarcho-syndicalists precipitated led to embittered conflict rather than reluctant cooperation.²⁹ As the strength of the communists continued to grow throughout the early months of 1937, Juan Comorera – a member of the

²³ "Evelyn Hutchins Interview," interview, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, 12.

²⁴ Benjamin Iceland, "The Big Retreat," *The Volunteer*. February, 1987, 8.

²⁵ Ibid; "Benjamin Iceland," Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www.alba-valb.org/volunteers/benjamin-isaac-iceland/?searchterm=ben%20iceland>.

²⁶ Benjamin Iceland, "The Big Retreat," *The Volunteer*. February, 1987, 8.

²⁷ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 360.

²⁸ Eddie Conlon, *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action* (Dublin: Worker's Solidarity Movement, 1984), 6; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 360.

²⁹ Ibid.

PSUC and the food minister of Barcelona – was able to end the state-sponsored food supply of Catalonia.³⁰ Dissension like this continued, and only a few months later the desperate anarcho-syndicalists participated in instigating a period of civil violence, known as the May Days, in the streets of Barcelona against communist factions – ultimately claiming the lives of 400 people.³¹ Eventually the government would be forced to call in the *Asaltos* – the Spanish special police force – to quell the bloodshed, sparking a series of events that would spell the end of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain.³² The anarcho-syndicalist movement, unlike the International Brigades’ cause, was an almost solely Spanish enterprise, which meant that its adherents were fighting not only for the cause itself but also for their homes and families.³³ The Spanish were very aware of the atrocities that followed each Falangist victory. In Malaga, Italian troops – rather than pursuing the retreating republican forces – chased and shelled fleeing civilians for hundreds of miles.³⁴ The anarcho-syndicalists, though romantic in their pursuit of social revolution, were aware that they were fighting for more than just an abstraction. This reality exacerbated factional differences as, in the eyes of the anarcho-syndicalists, the agenda of the communists was not just bringing the republic one step closer to its fall, but also implicitly endangering their homes and families as well. It is patent that much of the divisiveness within the republican side was in large part due to the overt hypocrisy and pugnacity of the Spanish Comintern. Newspapers like *Pravda* in the Soviet Union described the destruction of the anarchist and Trotskyite movements as the Comintern’s ultimate goal for republican Spain, and the communists’ imprisonment and torture of the POUM leader Andrés Nin – a principal architect of the collectivist policy – further demonstrated those intents.³⁵ Thus although not necessarily the primary cause, the uncompromising specificity of the anarcho-syndicalists’ agenda – no

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 427; Ibid, 429.

³² Ibid, 428.

³³ Eddie Conlon, *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action* (Dublin: Worker’s Solidarity Movement, 1984), 2.

³⁴ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (United Kingdom: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 21.

³⁵ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 361; Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War 1931-39* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1967), 403.

doubt supplemented by ideologies of terrorism inherited from anarchist precursors like Bakunin – deprived them of the unifying quality promoted by the Internationals.

Whereas the intransigence of the anarcho-syndicalist movement led to its undoing, the inclusiveness and diversity of the International Brigades allowed their principles to survive the Spanish Civil War. In mid-March, 1938, the beginning of the end for the Spanish Republic, Alvah Bessie and 36 fellow soldiers were crammed into a single train car on their way to the front.³⁶ They were keenly aware of the decisive Falangist offensive that would eventually split Catalonia from Valencia, and yet they continued to sing enthusiastic and sentimental ballads such as “Love’s Old Sweet Song,” a telling demonstration of tenacious spirit.³⁷ Similarly, during the rebels’ Catalonia Offensive, almost a year closer to the fall of the republic, the International Brigades had been routed after suffering unimaginable losses.³⁸ Ben Iceland and some of his fellow brigaders were left behind in the chaos and strafed by fighter planes while fleeing.³⁹ As they retreated, they encountered Spanish republican soldiers and asked them for water; in this dialogue, Eliot called them “comrades.”⁴⁰ Though a small detail, this diction is emblematic of the revolutionary spirit that persisted despite the decline of the Republic in the war. While brigaders like Eliot continued to use the term despite the horrors they had faced, it had been abandoned, as Orwell is keen to note in *Homage to Catalonia*, in cities as revolutionary as Barcelona since 1937 – a barometer for the fall of revolutionary sentiment among the civilian population.⁴¹ Despite the continual defeats suffered by the International Brigades, they did not lose the zeal that inspired them to come to Spain in the first place, and the romanticism that had further captured them since arriving. Decades later, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade veteran Abraham Osheroff put it plainly: “Spain was the place where I learned that I didn’t have to know that I was gonna win in order to fight... whether you win or lose, you resist.”⁴²

³⁶ Alvah Bessie, “Alvah Bessie Diary,” diary, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, accessed May 10, 2017, 12.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ben Iceland, “The Big Retreat,” *The Volunteer*. February, 1987, 7.

³⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 10.

⁴¹ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (United Kingdom: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 113.

⁴² Sebastian Faber, “Abe Osheroff,” interview, January 17, 2011, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, accessed may 16, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUkRP_9o8Hg.

Although the causes of both the International Brigades and the anarcho-syndicalists were inherently idealistic – each expressed a belief in social unity and civil justice – one movement survived while the other did not. Anarcho-syndicalism, with its rigid adherence to social revolution, entrenched itself in the minutiae of republican infighting, while the brigaders’ cause, with its inclusivity, was able to overcome internal divisions and put up a heroic, even if ultimately futile, fight against the evils of fascism in the Spanish Civil War. The anarcho-syndicalists were fighting for their families and their country as much as for a cause; the same cannot be said for the International Brigades. Members of both groups survived the war; many International brigaders returned to their native countries prior to the war’s end and numerous anarcho-syndicalists were able to escape across the border to France following the fall of Catalonia. Nevertheless, even the anarchist émigrés were doomed as they would later be condemned to concentration camps during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II.⁴³ Meanwhile, the brigaders’ cause came to define the fight against fascism in the Second World War and would live on even to the present. Indeed, the anarcho-syndicalist movement proved itself to be the last bastion of utopian socialism at such a national level in the Western world, and thus its decline from prominence marked the waning of an ideology older than Marx himself. Anarchism still exists. It has never matched, however, the power it once held in Spain. After 1939, such undisguised romanticism in the form of social revolution was virtually never again encountered as prominently on a political level – especially without the presence of a dictator whose authoritarianism was intrinsically incompatible with romanticism. The world no longer associates feelings of optimism and passion with social revolution, but rather with notions of democracy, international solidarity, and secular humanism – all values the International Brigades embodied. Perhaps the greatest paradox of all is that what were once explicitly romantic endeavors for groups like the Abraham Lincoln Brigade have become so widely accepted and achieved that their romantic quality is almost taken for granted.

⁴³ Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War 1931-39* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1967), 463.

Bibliography

- “Alvah Bessie.” Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Accessed May 12, 2017.
<http://www.alba-valb.org/volunteers/alvah-bessie>.
- Asim, Jabari. "The Politics and Poetry of Langston Hughes." June 7, 2004. Accessed June 25, 2017.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A21849-2004Jun7.html>.
- “Benjamin Iceland.” Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Accessed May 12, 2017.
<http://www.alba-valb.org/volunteers/benjamin-isaac-iceland/?searchterm=ben%20iceland>.
- Bessie, Alvah. “Alvah Bessie Diary.” Diary. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Accessed May 10, 2017.
- Conlon, Eddie. *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action*. Dublin: Worker’s Solidarity Movement, 1984.
- “Evelyn Hutchins Interview.” Interview. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives.
- Faber, Sebastian. “Abe Osheroff.” Interview. January 17, 2011. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Accessed May 16, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUkRP_9o8Hg.
- Hughes, Langston. “Letter from Spain.” Letter. November, 1937. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives.
- Iceland, Ben. “The Big Retreat.” *The Volunteer*. February, 1987.
- Jackson, Gabriel. *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War 1931-39*. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1967.
- Katz, Hyman. “Hyman Katz to Mother.” Letter. November 25, 1937. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives.
- Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. United Kingdom: Secker & Warburg, 1938.
- Palmer, R. R., Joel Colton, and Lloyd S. Kramer. *A History of Europe in the Modern World*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014.
- Thomas, Hugh. *The Spanish Civil War*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.
- White, Jack. “A Rebel in Barcelona: Jack White’s first Spanish impressions.” November 11, 1936.
http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/jw_first.html.