

**THE MEN WHO FOUGHT AND DIED IN THE SPANISH CIVIL
WAR AS PART OF THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE WERE
VISIONARIES; ISOLATIONIST UNITED STATES POLICY
FORBADE THEIR PARTICIPATION, THEY LEFT THEIR HOMES
TO FIGHT IN A STRANGE LAND, AND BECAME SOME OF THE
MOST SUCCESSFUL SOLDIERS IN THE CONFLICT.**

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	Page
Introduction.....	i
I. THE UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY OF ISOLATIONISM PROHIBITED AMERICANS FROM JOINING IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR.	1
1. Isolationism is deeply rooted in American history.	1
2. World War One and the Great Depression caused an increase in the popularity of isolationism.	3
3. Public sentiment was in favor of a free Spain, but in favor of military involvement	5
II. THE MEN WHO VOLUNTEERED WERE TRUE IDEALISTS	7
1. The volunteers became soldiers because of their beliefs rather than their experience or patriotism.	7
2. The volunteers faced challenges in their travel to Spain.	9
3. The Spanish people welcomed the volunteers.	10
III. THE VOLUNTEERS BECAME REAL SOLDIERS DURING THE WAR	13
1. Most volunteers were totally inexperienced in warfare.	13
2. The first battles were suicide missions.	14
3. By the end of the war, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was one of the best divisions of troops.	17
IV. Conclusion.....	19
Maps.....	22
Addendum on Samuel Levinger.....	23
Bibliography.....	25
Works Referenced.....	26

INTRODUCTION

*“Comrades, the battle is bloody and the war is long:
Still let us climb the grey hills and charge the guns,
Pressing with lean bayonets toward the slopes beyond.
Soon those who are still living will see green grass.
A free bright country shining with a star;
And those who charged the guns will be remembered;
And from red blood white pinnacles shall tower.”*

Samuel H. Levinger, 1937

The prelude to the Second World War took place between the years 1936 and 1939. During the First World War, Spain remained neutral, attempting instead to solve its domestic problems. There were still only two classes of people in Spain, the rich and the poor. As is usually the case, the wealthy were extraordinarily so, living off the high rents imposed on the peasants' lands. The lower class was understandably unhappy about their economic situation, and thus repeatedly demanded elections.

In 1931, after continuous rioting, nationwide elections were finally held, and King Alfonso XIII no longer ruled the country. Alfonso refused to abdicate, and instead fled the country. The new liberal government separated church and state, closed all Roman Catholic schools, and attempted to cleanse Spain of the Church's corruption and greed. The Catholic church controlled all the country's schools, this had a dramatic effect on literacy. For a whole generation many school children would remain illiterate.

During the next election, women were given the vote, and this caused the election of a conservative government in the hopes that children would return to school. This Nationalist government only retained power for three years, and in

1936, elections were held again. This time the liberals won, but divisions between the conservative and liberal factions were so deep that violence soon erupted. In February an army comprised of a few trained troops created the Popular Front. This new party consisted of militia members controlled by various trade unions, with loose centralized control. In one year, workers revolted, three hundred thirty one strikes occurred, and arson destroyed one hundred seventy churches, sixty-nine clubs, and ten newspapers (Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia 1997). Government was almost nonexistent; the real power rested in the military.

As with the First World War, the spark that lit the fire of war was an assassination. In revenge for the murder of a Communist Lieutenant, former finance Minister José Calvo was arrested and executed on July 13, 1936. When violence broke, the power shifted to an up and coming officer, Francisco Franco. He seized the power of the military, and civil war spread quickly. The names by which the two sides were called are rather confusing. Troops of the elected government were referred to as Republican, or Loyalists. The International Brigades, of which the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was a part, fell under the command of these troops. Generalissimo Franco's troops were called Nationalists for propaganda reasons, but they were truly rebels and fascists.

In the South, Seville, Cordoba, Granada and Cádiz fell to the Republican troops. Most of the North fell to the rebels, all of Galicia, most of León, and the port of Asturias (see Map 1). The Republicans faced massive internal divisions, with separate supply lines and troops from each political party or trade union, each of which wanted direct control over their own men. By August, the rebels

united the north and south by capturing Badajoz, and headed toward Madrid to finish off the elected government. In Madrid, the International Brigades defended against the siege for twenty eight months, until the Republicans were starved out of the capital on January 26, 1939. This ended the ruthless war and began Franco's regime of cruelty.

This paper is not about the war, or the years after. It is about the men and women who left the safety of their homes in the United States against the laws of their government to fight fascism. These remarkable individuals risked all to confront fascism before the rest of the world would. They volunteered to fight for a cause they believed in. The brave men of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were indeed visionaries.

CHAPTER I

THE UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY OF ISOLATIONISM PROHIBITED AMERICANS FROM JOINING IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR.

The sacrifice of the Lincoln Brigade is made more impressive by the political climate in which these individuals lived. The United States was intensely isolationist, having just lost a generation of young men in the First World War. No one was eager to engage in another devastating war of attrition. Soldiers returning home from the war found African Americans in their previously all white neighborhoods. Race riots were common and Ku Klux Klan membership continued to rise. President Wilson's failures to convince Congress to ratify the League of Nations sparked a backlash in the election of 1920. As a result, the fiercely isolationist, "America First" candidate, Warren G. Harding took office.

1. Isolationism is deeply rooted in American history.

Ever since the founding of our country Americans have attempted to stay out of strictly European affairs. President George Washington declined to serve another term in office, and published his farewell address to the nation on September 17, 1796. In it, he gave his best advice for the young country in the trying years to come. The central tenet of his advice was to refrain from entering into alliances with foreign nations, specifically European nations. "The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial

relations with them to have as little political connection as possible” (Bragdon, McCutchen and Ritchie 1113).

Fifty years later, after the war of 1812 with Britain, President James Monroe had similar advice for the country. His Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was designed to end European influence in the Western Hemisphere. It later became the foundation of United States foreign policy. President Monroe declared that the United States would stay out of European affairs if they did not interfere with ours. He essentially drew a line down the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, saying “our side” and “your side,” much as a child would in a sand box. Colonies were to be allowed to revolt if they wished, and any “interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny” would be viewed as “manifestation of any unfriendly disposition toward the United States” (Bragdon, McCutchen and Ritchie 1114).

There was little weight to Monroe’s words, as the Doctrine was not a formal act of Congress, merely a speech given by the President. The Doctrine was little more than a declaration of the Western Hemisphere being “out of bounds” for European powers. The concession that the United States would not interfere in European affairs was irrelevant, as there was no European fear that this former renegade English colony would intercede in a dispute on “the continent.” After all, the United States had just ten years before barely defeated its former masters, the British in the war of 1812.

While the Doctrine was without substance, and largely ignored by Europeans, it did provide the mindset for the saga of isolationism in the United

States; it provided a historical framework that resurfaced over one hundred years later.

2. World War One and the Great Depression caused an increase in the popularity of isolationism.

After the First World War, the Great War, the “war to end all wars”, the United States was not eager to get involved in another drawn out war of attrition. The focus in Congress eventually shifted to domestic affairs, where there were considerable problems to solve: inflation ran rampant, race riots persisted, the cost of living was a high, and the general public was apathetic. In the United States in 1919, there were 3,600 strikes, with four million workers participating (Between the Wars 1987).

This shift was only solidified after President Woodrow Wilson tried, and failed to solve one looming problem. Wilson wanted to assure that future generations would not have to suffer the terror of another modern war. Wilson successfully incorporated the League of Nations into the Versailles Treaty. He believed that war would end forever when all nations, large and small, sat down and worked out their differences over the bargaining table.

In the face of opposition from Congress, President Wilson took his case to the people, campaigning from his Presidential train across 8,000 miles of America. He traveled coast to coast, touting his plan to end war forever, delivering thirty seven speeches in less than one month, exhausting himself in the

process. He eventually collapsed in Pueblo, Colorado, suffering a stroke which left him paralyzed. His wife quickly isolated him from politics, censored his mail, prohibited all visitors. When Secretary of State Lansing attempted to call cabinet meetings, Mrs. Wilson quickly stopped the meeting and dismissed him. Edith Wilson was a wife first and the First Lady second. Little did it matter that her husband was the President of the United States of America during troubled times, she was determined to nurse him back to health without the distractions and pressure of politics. When a close advisor sent Wilson an explanation stating that a compromise would be necessary to ratify the Versailles Treaty, Mrs. Wilson would have none of it and disposed of the letter. Leaderless and recently defeated in the election of 1918, Wilson's Democratic party did not compromise, and the Treaty was never ratified by the United States Congress.

In the upcoming election of 1920, President Wilson was unable to participate and the Democratic candidate James M. Cox was soundly defeated by Warren G. Harding. Harding campaigned on the platform "America First". He was patriotic, committed, and struck a chord within the people. America had made the world "safe for democracy," and was ready to enjoy peace.

Shortly before his death, Wilson warned that "within a generation there will be another world war if the nations of the world do not concert the method by which to prevent it." Despite this ominous truth, the United States turned inward; the race riots loomed as soldiers returned home to find Blacks in northern cities, the Ku Klux Klan gained power, and America turned its back on the troubles of Europe.

3. Public sentiment was in favor of a free Spain, but in favor of military involvement .

A list of major sponsors to the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy reads like a “who’s who” of the 1930’s. Martha Gelhorn, Rockwell Kent, Sinclair Lewis, Archibald MacLeish, Dorothy Parker, Elliot Paul, Upton Sinclair and others all donated funds (Eby 1969). The Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade raised more than \$425,000, and supplied medical support to the wounded. Prominent sponsors of this group were Henry Luce, the publisher of Life, and presidential adviser Bernard Baruch. In a 1937 survey of four hundred and ten prominent American authors, only seven were neutral, and one favored Franco. The remaining four hundred and two stood behind a democratic Spain. On April 4, 1938, three thousand women marched on the Washington Mall to protest the weak arms and trade embargo against Spain. Public opinion in the United States was two to one in favor of the Republicans in January 1937. This figure later rose to three to one, but most Americans supported “moral support” and not direct military action (Katz and Crawford 1989).

David Thompson, a professional writer covering the war remarked: “The government wasn’t representing the will of the American people on the Spanish Civil War. And there was nothing you could do but do something personal. Put

up or shut up. They were fighting for all the things that America stood for” (Katz and Crawford 1989). The political climate of isolationism made the Lincoln Brigade’s sacrifice that much more profound. While the rest of America turned their back on Europe, these unique individuals recognized the beginnings of fascism and fought back. These few brave Americans felt the plight of the Spanish people, and they acted. Instead of writing a letter to the editor, or protesting, they did something personal. Many of these heroes paid the ultimate price for their ideals, giving their lives so that others might live free.

CHAPTER II

THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO VOLUNTEERED WERE TRUE IDEALISTS.

Over 35,000 men and women left their homes in fifty-two foreign lands to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Almost 2,800 of them were Americans. They fought because no one else would. No foreign militaries rose to the support of the democratically elected Spanish government. While Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy sent their best troops to Franco's aid, the Western powers did nothing. They signed non-intervention pacts and committed themselves to the cause morally. Only the Russian government supplied the Republicans with arms. The withholding of Western support did "more to bring about [the] final defeat than the presence of Mussolini's regular army divisions, [and] Hitler's Condor Legion (Rolfe 8) To quote one outraged veteran: "with guns, damn it, we would have won!"

1. The volunteers became soldiers because of their beliefs rather than their experience or patriotism.

There are more books written about this small civil war in Spain than on the entire First World War (Katz and Crawford 1989). While the gallantry of the volunteers did not inspire foreign governments to intervene, it did influence artists. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, perhaps Ernest Hemingway's most famous book, was written about the war, and the main character is based on Richard

Merriman, the commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Picasso's *Guernica* captures the horror of the war: civilians trampled by horses, women mourning their dead sons, houses burning. Most of the Republican army was civilian, which meant Franco carried out much of the war against civilian targets.

Some young people in America, aware of the horrors in Spain, decided to do something. Salaria Key, a young woman who enlisted as a nurse, but did not see combat, remarked: "I'm not going to sit down and let this happen. I'm going to go out and help even if it means my life. This is my world" (Katz and Crawford 1989).

The sacrifice of the volunteers was not the result of a simple infatuation with Communism, they recognized what was actually occurring, and defended their, and America's, principles. Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* wrote: "You cannot dismiss these youngsters with the contemptuous label 'Reds:' they are not fighting for Moscow, but for their ideals and because they would rather die than see a fascist regime under any shape or auspices installed in the United States. The American battalions are unique in one respect, among all the internationals: they remain American to the core" (Katz and Crawford 1989).

2. The volunteers faced challenges in their travels to Spain.

It was illegal to travel to Spain from the United States during the years of the war, but “it quickly became evident that men willing to expose their flesh to fascist bullets were not likely to be intimidated by American consuls brandishing rubber stamps.” Passports were stamped “Not Valid For Travel to Spain” and a \$3,000 fine was threatened for the attempt (Eby 1969). The only real consequence the United States government was able to levy was to forbid those who broke the terms of their passports and traveled to Spain the use of the American consulate as their mailing address.

Young men had to take steamships to France, where customs at Le Havre simply waved them through. One group, sailing December 26th 1936 was instructed to tell port officials that they were headed to the Paris Exposition. “It apparently did not occur to anyone that the exposition was not scheduled to open until summer” (Eby 1969). The soldiers in this particular group were given fifty dollars for military gear and identical black bags. They crossed over the Pyrenees at night, fighting their way through the wind and the driving snow to be met on the other side by Comintern officials (Eby 1969). The Comintern, or the Third International, was headquartered in Moscow, and was essentially the foreign wing of the Soviet Communist Party and recruited for the International Brigades.

The young men and women who volunteered did so because they knew it was the right thing to do; consequences and the illegality were second to their ideals. According to Martha Gelhorn, a journalist and Ernest Hemingway’s future

wife: “We just knew that Spain was the place to stop fascism. It was one of those moments in history when there was no doubt” (Katz and Crawford 1989).

3. The Spanish people welcomed the volunteers.

Six months after the beginning of the war, parades were common practice in Barcelona. People barely waved any more, as nearly every day a new regiment departed for the front, but one event evoked the passion of earlier days. On January 6th 1937, troops waving the American flag and singing the Star Spangled Banner marched down the street. The men could sing the second and third stanzas of the national anthem, a trait that at the time decried socialist leanings. Was the United States army finally here to defend freedom and stand up for justice? No, but sixty American citizens had taken it upon themselves to do just that. The first members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade had arrived (Eby, 1969).

The general attitude of the Spanish people is best evinced by a short story entitled “A Mother in Spain” by Samuel H. Levinger (see Addendum 1 for more information about Samuel H. Levinger). A group of soldiers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade discovers where “the best tortillas are made.” They arrive and declare that they intend to purchase a tortilla for all present. During the course of discussion, it becomes evident that the woman has lost two sons in the war. The six young men “get up in solemn tribute to the two sons of this mother.”

“We stood in bowed heads for a minute or two, the old woman standing before us crying without a sound. She look utterly frail, yet I thought then there

was something about her quite unbeaten. Then Manuel said with a sweep of his hands: ‘Comrades, I have something to propose. This old woman, she had lost her sons for freedom. I think we should make her the mother of the Cuban section of the Lincoln Battalion.’

One by one we went forward to kiss her. She was not crying now, but hugged each one of us passionately, kissing us three or four times. Then, tears flowing again, she went back to her tortillas.”

The short story is true, but its real meaning comes from its symbolism.

Many young Spanish men died for freedom, and the country mourned them. With the arrival of the Internationals, their suffering became recognized and validated. The Spanish people stand with the foreigners, and accept them as their own. They give the People’s salute “at the slightest provocation,” either with a raised fist or sickle. The whistled *Internationale* prompts “two or three other people going the other way [to] start singing it on the spot, and one can hear their voices going into the distance.” (Levinger 1937)

In an article to The Nation, Samuel Levinger recounts the kindness of the Spanish people:

I went to a fountain yesterday to get a drink. An old woman with a great pottery jug was there before me, but when she saw my International Brigade badge she wouldn’t consider filling her jug before I had drunk. They catch us and read us letters - in Spanish, an unknown language - from their sons at the front, dose us with oranges, bread, and too much *vino tinto*, and when they turn us loose ask us to look up their brothers in Montevideo, Uruguay, when we return. In fact, they are even more cordial to us than to their own boys, for we have come from a distant, almost mythical country to fight against the fascists and the landlords and the foreigners who send the bombing planes over their houses.

The Internationals’ sacrifice seems even greater than that of Spanish troops. While the latter fought on their own soil for their own freedom, the former left

safety to “take a shot at Hitler.” The Lincoln’s realized that “Guernica, Barcelona and Madrid were to be followed by Warsaw, London and Rotterdam. They were right, five months after the Nazi Condor Legion marched through Madrid, it marched through Warsaw” (¡No Pasaran! 1985).

CHAPTER III

THE VOLUNTEERS BECAME REAL SOLDIERS DURING THE WAR.

Over the course of the two year involvement of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the volunteers developed from young men who had never fired a rifle before into an almost mythical fighting force the mention of whose name would turn round a retreating Republican force. From the basic training of firing three shots into a hill to the slaughter at Jarama to the defense of Madrid, these green young men transformed themselves into a true battalion.

1. Most volunteers were totally inexperienced in warfare.

In George Orwell's book Homage to Catalonia, he recounts the utter lack of training the militia-based armies received in the beginning of the war. As an Englishman in a Spanish regiment, his training was comparable, if not better than that of the Lincoln Brigade's.

Most of Orwell's training consisted not of learning combat skills, but marching. "To my dismay I found that we were taught nothing about the use of weapons. The so-called instruction was simply parade-ground drill of the most antiquated, stupid kind: right turn, left turn, about turn" (Homage to Catalonia 9). Soldiers were not taught survival skills: taking cover, fixing a jammed rifle, hand-to-hand combat, or even the use of weapons. This was because there were no weapons to be had. Every available rifle, even those that were forty years old (the age of the weapon assigned to Orwell), was in use at the front. The shortage

was so bad that “fresh troops reaching the front always had to take their rifles from the troops they relieved at the line.” (Homage to Catalonia 10)

There was no discipline, this being a purely voluntary militia force; “if a man disliked an order he would step out of ranks and argue fiercely with the officer” (Homage to Catalonia 9). And things were even worse for the Lincoln Brigade, as it was assumed that all Englishmen or American’s knowledge of warfare was superior to the Spaniards’. Instruction was purely voluntary, and was often given in four languages, none of which was English.

Eventually, Orwell’s unit was sent to the front with two only hour’s notice. They were each handed a rifle, fifty cartridges, and sent to fight. Almost half of the “soldiers” were boys under sixteen, enlisted by their families for the ten pesetas daily wage.

2. The first few battles were suicide missions.

The Lincoln Bataillon’s first opportunity to “fight fascism, not play war games in a time-forgotten pueblo,” (Eby 1969) was at Jarama. On February 15th 1937, a convoy of trucks arrived to take the Brigade to Albacete. There, after a rousing speech by André Marty, the inept general of the International Brigades, they unloaded crates full of rifles donated to the Spanish Republic by Mexico. The men again boarded the trucks, and were sent on slowly to Jarama.

The Fascists attempted to sever the Madrid-Valencia highway, the capital’s supply route, and starve the government into submission. The Lincolns’ task was

to hold the fascists to their plateau, not allowing them to descend to the valley floor and cross the Tajuna river. A German International led the men up a hill in the dark, pointed them in the direction the of the enemy, and told them to dig in. They did so without proper shovels, only their helmets and hands. By dawn they had created a circular barricade deep enough in which to lie. Unfortunately, it was on top of a hill lower than the enemy's, and as the light appeared, shells were lobbed towards them. The first landed far beyond them, and one soldier wisecracked "What the hell are they trying to do, kill us?" (Rolfe 8) But the jokes ended, and the unit frantically dug to deepen the trench. They called their new home "Suicide Hill."

After a few nights in the frigid cold of the trench, the rear commander declared it time to advance. On February 23rd the Lincoln Brigade tried to advance four hundred yards through an olive grove with the assistance of two Soviet tanks. When the order came, the men disregarded the formations they had learned and simply fought from tree to tree. It was easier than anyone expected, as the enemy was far more concerned with two armored tanks than with a bunch of boys with rifles. One tank exploded and the other retreated; enemy fire turned to the defenseless men, and slaughter ensued. Those beyond the grove were cut down at once. Those in the forest fell behind trees. The attack was over in ten minutes.

Three days later, the rear commander decided he had discovered the key to the enemy line, Hill 694. After supporting aircraft, tanks and artillery barraged the enemy, it should have been a relatively easy task to take the hill. In reality,

two tanks arrived, fired a few shots and left. The Spanish forces who were supposed to advance with the Lincolns went over the top and fell back immediately. The rear commander telephoned Merriman, the Lincoln's commander, and informed him that the Spanish Brigade "had already advanced seven hundred yards and were being cut to pieces because the Americans refused their support" (Eby 1969). This was an absolute lie, but Merriman was forced to comply and personally led the charge. As the men went over the top, the enemy fire died. Thirty seconds later, when the Americans were perfect targets, it re-erupted, destroying the line and killing Merriman.

The charge continued up a thirty degree slope, against three rows of interlocking machine guns. The Slavic, British and Spanish forces all fell back. Only the Americans continued. They too stopped within ten minutes, but the order to retreat was never given, the charge was stopped by the sheer intensity of enemy fire.

In that one charge, the battalion was devastated. Over one quarter, 127 out of 450 men, were killed (Rolfe 57). Ernest Hemingway called it "an act of monumental stupidity." But the attack was not a defeat, it was a complete success. It demonstrated to the rebels that the Madrid-Valencia road was well defended. The supply routes were intact; Madrid was not encircled. The Fascists never gained a foot of ground.

3. By the end of the war, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was one of the best divisions of troops.

The bloodbath at Jarama was not the end of the Brigade. It was put under the command of better officers and augmented by fresh volunteers from America as well as Spanish boys. The brigade fought in every major battle until they were disbanded by the Spanish government to curry international favor in the hopes that the United Nations was more likely to intervene if the war was purely Spanish.

The Brigade received its first taste of hand-to-hand combat at Belchité. The town was strategically key to the entire Aragon offensive because of its location on a road that goes south to Madrid which was critical for communications and resupply, and on a road to the west deeper into the Aragon province. It was a town that even Napoleon could not conquer, but which fell to the International Brigades.

The Lincoln Brigade were the only force to fight on the first day, alone against German designed defenses. Two rows of steel spikes protected concrete pillboxes which covered every avenue of approach with fire. In the course the six day battle, the outer defenses eventually fell, and urban combat commenced. The church at the center of town was a Fascist stronghold, built right into the rock. It sat at the convergence of all the roads, so enemy snipers were devastating. A defector from the soldiers holed into the church was able to return to his Fascist comrades and convince them to surrender. As the Republican anthem was played,

a few shots were heard. The soldiers had killed their own officers, and they then surrendered (Rolfe 125). They came out crying *Viva Rusia, Viva Rusia*; so powerful was Franco's propaganda that they thought they were surrendering to Russian troops (Katz and Crawford 14).

Ernest Hemingway, who earlier decried the assault of Hill 694, said "they have become soldiers. Those that were left were tough, with blackened, matter-of-fact faces, and after seven months they knew their trade" (Katz and Crawford 1989). Matthews, a writer for the "*New York Times*" said the Lincolns were "good fighters who knew they were good. [They] made the American battalion as famous as the Thaelman [German], Garibaldi [Italian] and Dimitrov [Russian] battalions" (Katz and Crawford 1989). The green volunteers, some of whom only shot five times into a hill for training, had truly become soldiers. After a deadly learning curve, they were able to fight and defeat some of the world's best trained troops: Franco's Moors, the Nazi Condor Legion, and Mussolini's regular army divisions.

CONCLUSION

Half of those who enlisted in the Lincoln Brigade died in Spain. The surviving veterans did not cease to be active in combatting fascism at the end of the war. Many volunteered for duty in World War Two to finish off the fascist threat. Many died in their second bout with fascism, and only ten percent lived to see Spain free from Franco's rule in 1975. They continued to be active in the civil rights movement, protesting the war in Vietnam, United States intervention in Central America, Apartheid, and the nuclear arms race (¡No Pasaran!, 1985).

Because of their ties with the Communist party, veterans returning to America were shunned during the rise of anti-communist fears in the 1950's. One man was frequently denied employment because of his supposed communist leanings, all because he was a Lincoln veteran. Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) was required to register as a Communist organization during the McCarthy era witch-hunts. The House Un-American Activities Committee called the veterans "premature anti-fascists" (Katz and Crawford 1987). VALB refused to register as Communist organization, and eventually tried and won its case in front of the Supreme Court in 1965.

There is still controversy to this day about the war and those who fought. Recently, New Hampshire state Senator Burt Cohen from New Castle championed their cause in attempting to dedicate a memorial in their honor in the Statehouse Hall of Flags. The dedication was stopped by New Hampshire House and Senate leadership under the guise that the public had not had a chance to "provide its

ideas” (Ayote 2001). In reality, the Joint Historical Committee had a chance to review the memorial, and its potential controversy, and the memorial was allowed to continue as planned.

Some continue to see the Abraham Lincoln Brigade volunteers as “reds,” a term describing Communists as blood thirsty savages intent on destroying freedom and democracy. New Hampshire State Representative Ralph Rosen of Laconia, a WWII veteran, said that “it was a deceptively cynical ploy, choosing the name of the American most responsible for eliminating slavery in this country and attaching it to an organization dedicated to enslaving the whole world” (Ayote, 2001). Some people still think Communism is the scourge of the world, they refuse to see the visionary stance these young men took to stop fascism in its tracks. Had the Lincoln Brigade succeeded, perhaps Representative Rosen’s war, the Second World War, would have been unnecessary. Had America intervened in Spain, perhaps Germany and Italy would not have been quite so aggressive knowing that Western democracy was intolerant of fascism.

These young men truly were American heroes. Edwin Rolfe wrote in his book The Lincoln Battalion:

“Some men are blind to facts; others, like governments, ignore them. There were undoubtedly many who never fully believed that Hitler and Mussolini were waging an obvious war of invasion in Spain... But the young Americans who went to Spain to fight, and to die as so many did in their effort to preserve the Republic, were clearer sighted ... than most men on the quiet deathbeds of old age. They saw through the self-imposed and cowardly censorship of the American press; they did not have to wait for Gallup polls to know that the American people were overwhelmingly on the side of the Spanish Republic.” (14).

In the end, the Lincolns lost, pulled off the front and sent home when the International Brigades were dissolved. Franco won the war, and he began a fifty

year reign of terror. In the end, fascism won; the idealists met Fascist steel and it did not bend like tin, as so many songs proclaimed. But it does not matter that they lost, it is more telling that they fought at all. A pamphlet produced by VALB surmises it best: “but they lost, say the cynics, not knowing that it is more important that they fought - fought when they didn’t have to fight, fought when it brought no public glory in their home towns, fought to put a lie to the cynicism that keeps people in the darkness. They won’t go away” (¡No Pasaran!, 1985).

ADDENDUM ON SAMUEL LEVINGER

One recruit in particular has a special connection to the author. Samuel H. Levinger, the author's great uncle, fought and died for his ideals. He was a machine gunner in the Tom Mooney Battalion, a subset of the Lincoln Brigade.

The son of a rabbi and an author, Sam was an adventuresome child. At the age of eight he ran away from his home in Delaware to re-enact the story of Huckleberry Finn, floating south on the Mississippi. He didn't get very far.

His family were active liberals and anti-fascists, not Communists. His parents supported both Franklin Delanor Roosevelt & Norman Thomas, a socialist candidate for president in 1936. They were proud defenders of striking workers. When Sam was fourteen, he ran away to join a coal workers strike in Kentucky. He was the sole person to be arrested for "talking back" to the sheriff.

He traveled to Spain because of his progressive values. He thought that stopping fascists and nazis in Spain would weaken them in Italy and Germany, perhaps prevent another world war which was clearly coming in 1936. World War Two only started three years later.

Sam wanted to use his experience in Spain to further his writing. He wrote articles for The Nation and other magazines on his experiences. He thought that he was collecting material for his future career as a professional writer; the talents for which he certainly had.

He died in the battle of Belchité sometime in August or September 1937. He was twenty years old. The following is his last letter home, informing his parents that he was going back to the front from a hospital in Madrid.

In Case of death only, please send
this to Mrs. Lee J. Levinger,
2257 Indianola Ave,
Columbus, Ohio, U.S. A.
Do not send in case of injury.

Thanks, comrade.

Samuel Levinger

Dear Mother and Father:

I suppose that by the time you receive this, I will have been dead several weeks. Of course, war is a confused thing, and I have seen enough certified corpses walking around to make me a little sceptical, but if you receive this and an official announcement too, count it as definite.

This is the last day of relief. We are going up to some front tomorrow to clear out the Fascists. I do not doubt that we will be successful in repatriating the boys across the street, but it will be at considerable cost, and as the Lincoln Battalion is good it should be in the middle of it.

I still stick by my original conviction that I will be alive long after a whole lot of dictators have died of lead poisoning or hardened arteries; but I have been wrong on other matters before. Hence I decided to write this letter.

Certainly I am not enthusiastic about dying. I have gotten a good bit of fun out of my first twenty years despite the fact that, except for last last six months, they were pretty useless. I suppose I would have enjoyed my next twenty just as mach. I wanted to write this letter, however, to make clear that there is absolutely nothing to regret.

If I were alive again I think I would join in the battle again at this crucial place. There was an extremely important job to do over here and I was one of the men who decided to do it. That a good many of us were killed while doing it is unfortunate, and the fact that I was killed is still more unfortunate from our standpoints. However, this has no relevance to the necessity of doing the job. The difference between world Fascism and world socialism is far too great to permit our safeties to be a factor for consideration.

Next I want to beg both of you not to see this out of context. World change is a stern master. It had killed and will kill millions of boys as dear to somebody as I am to you. The Fascists want war, and bitter war will give them.

You are more fortunate than many of the parents, for you still have two children with extremely bright futures. You have your extremely valuable work. I am less able to evaluate Father's work, though I realize its great worth; but in my field, that of an author, I can say I think Mother would become one of the most valuable authors of the generation. And you still have the emancipation of America to be achieved.

I think my ideas on immortality agree largely with yours. I once wrote a lousy poem "If there is darkness beyond I shall sleep, if light I shall wake." So if I meet you folks again all to the good -- if not, we've had quite a bit of pleasure in each other's company while it lasted.

As for my friends, give them my love if you run across them. Tell them I said there's only one thing to remember -- that there's one comrade less to do the job of soldier of discontent. They'll all have to do some work to make up for my getting perforated. See if that will get a few of these mugwumps into action.

This has been a clumsy letter. I Just want to say that I love you both a great deal, and so forth. Also that it isn't such a serious thing.

Love and revolutionary greetings.

Joy to the world.

Samuel Levinger

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