

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade - A Profile in Courage, Honor and Hope

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The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was an American contingent of about 2800 volunteers who fought on the side of the Second Spanish Republic during the country's 1936 - 1939 Civil War against the fascist Nationalist rebellion under General Francisco Franco. From 1937 through 1938, it aimed to stop international fascism under Hitler and Mussolini that led to WW II. This essay explains who the "Lincolns" were, why they're important, and what their relevance is to America today under George Bush. First a look at the Spanish Civil War and why these Americans fought in it.

The war began when Franco's troops invaded Spain in July, 1936 to unseat an unstable Republic that developed from the social dislocations after WW I. Post-war saw a wave of revolutionary unrest that led to the military dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera in 1923. Rapid decline followed under him after the boom years of the 1920s. It weakened Spain's monarchy, returned the country to republican rule, but things weakened when a liberal-Socialist coalition tried addressing agrarian problems that beleaguered all Spanish governments for generations. Reforms failed and so did the coalition. It came apart after an attempted military coup on the right and an anarchosyndicalist insurrection on the left that culminated in the Casas Viejas massacre of Andalulsiian peasants in January, 1933.

By summer, Spain's many parties and organizations began regrouping and polarizing. In November, the Spanish Confederation of Right Groups (CEDA) coalition replaced the liberal-Socialists. Positions then hardened on the left and right leading to the 1934 "October Revolution" when Asturian miners in northern Spain became the epicenter of a general uprising throughout the country. It brought "Army of Africa" commander Francisco Franco from Spanish Morocco to the mainland for the first time in five centuries to defend "Christian Civilization" from "red barbarism." It was the start of class and regional conflict that became the Spanish Civil War two years later.

It pitted an alliance of Nationalist forces on the right under Franco against a "Popular Front" Republican/Loyalist coalition consisting of trade unionists and their political organizations:

- the General Confederation of Workers (UGT), a labor federation of the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), and an anarchosyndicalist General Confederation of Labor (CNT);
- they, in turn, were allied with the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) coalition of Spanish Trotskyists, Communist Left (ICE), and Workers and Peasants Bloc; the United Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC); and the small Communist Party (PCE).

Few in America remember the Spanish Civil War, its significance or even that it happened which says a lot about the state of education in the richest country in the world. It should be

the best anywhere but instead opts for mediocrity, ignorance and an effort to produce good citizens, most barely literate, to serve the nation's ruling class and not the greater good. That, however, is a topic for another time.

The Spanish Civil War – July 17, 1936 – April 1, 1939

Like all extended wars, this one was ugly. Before it ended in April, 1939, hundreds of thousands died and many by mass killings that included Hitler's infamous fire-bombing of Guernica on April 26, 1937 that destroyed the town and killed an estimated 1650 people. An eye witness described it as follows: "The only things left standing were a church, a sacred tree, the symbol of the Basque people....There hadn't been a single anti-aircraft gun in the town. It had been mainly a fire raid....A sight that haunted me for weeks was the charred bodies of several women and children huddled together in what had been the cellar of a house. It had been a refugio." The same scene was repeated throughout the town. Guernica was in flames, but it was just a warmup, a prelude for what lay ahead.

April 1, 1939 marked the end of the Spanish Civil War. Five months later in September, Hitler invaded Poland, and the world again was at war with Spain staying out of it this time. Franco instead concentrated on solidifying power at home while nominally supporting his fascist allies. He imprisoned and slaughtered tens of thousands of his opponents in a post-war bloodbath/reign of terror. The Spanish war, while it lasted, however, was an historic revolution, and how different things might have been had the other side won. A radical working class movement, never seen before or since, lost out to a fascist alliance that became dominant and is now resurgent in America.

Back then, it was a rare time when oppressed workers, peasants and leftist intellectuals stood on one side and were aided by Soviet Russia, the international Socialist movement and the International Brigades. Against them were centralized state power elitists that included monarchists, the Catholic church, and the landowning and industrial fascist right supported by Germany, Italy and Portugal. Workers wanted a classless, stateless social democracy with implications far beyond a civil conflict in Spain.

They were attracted to it when Franco invaded and threatened their vision. Spontaneously they seized factories and other workplaces, collectivized the land, formed workers' militias throughout the country, dismantled the pro-fascist Catholic church, confiscated its property, and established political institutions run by workers' committees. It was a remarkable event for a short-lived social transformation toward a genuinely autonomous, free and democratic society until Franco finally prevailed.

In a decade of economic depression, disillusion, the rise of fascism, torment and turmoil up to WW II, the Spanish revolution was a sign of hope for working-class emancipation across the world, including in the US. It inspired intellectuals, trade unionists, and others as well as freedom-fighting men and women of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. They went Spain to support the type government they wanted at home and hoped would emerge if the "Popular Front" prevailed.

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade

They were around 2800 American volunteers who fought alongside the "Popular Front" Republican Loyalists as the American contingent of the International Brigades. From 1937 to 1938, they joined with 35,000 others from 52 countries to defend the free Spanish Republic

against Franco's Nationalist fascist alliance.

They were mostly young men and women from across America, deeply affected by the The Great Depression's despair, and they feared the fascist scourge engulfing Europe could affect them back home. They were ordinary people - working class, students, teachers, artists, dancers, athletes, the unemployed and others unified in a common belief that it's "better to die on your feet than live on your knees."

Most were members of the Young Communist League (CP). They allied with Industrial Workers of the World members ("Wobblies"), socialists forming their own (Eugene) Debs Column, and unaffiliated others. They were all committed in a common struggle. Some sought escape from The Great Depression, others went to fight for a better world unavailable at home, but all wanted to defeat fascism and risked their lives to do it. They also risked arrest or recrimination back home by defying a State Department prohibition against traveling to Spain so by doing it they broke the law.

It was worth it for what many saw as the quintessential struggle between democracy and tyranny. British author, social critic and journalist Eric Arthur Blair, aka George Orwell, felt the same. He went to Spain in 1936 to be with the Republican side and joined with the POUM coalition. He later wrote about it in what some call his finest work - "Homage to Catalonia." It sold just 50 copies in his lifetime, but another to it with a copy owned, read and admired long ago by this writer. It was more about social revolution than a civil war and centrally about tyranny against socially democratic forces on the left.

The allied groups on both sides, however, had their own agendas. On the left, the socialists (POUM) wanted a worker-controlled government, the communists (PSUC) a centralized one, and the Anarchists/Anarchosyndicalists (CNT) one that was decentralized. On the right, Franco loyalists wanted a fascist Spain like in Germany and Italy, latifundistas (big landowners) wanted a feudal system, and the Roman Catholic Church supported the monarchy and had its own elitist, pro-fascist conservative agenda.

The "Lincolns," wanted democratic freedom and fascism defeated. Its volunteers became known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade although fighting units chose their own names and identities. In keeping with the "Popular Front" culture, they became part of the Fifteenth International Brigade along with nationals from other countries. They called themselves the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the George Washington Battalion, and the John Brown Battery that included 125 doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers and technicians with the American Medical Bureau. They were all volunteers for a noble cause and among them was the first ever racially integrated unit in US history and first one ever led by a black commander. Most never fired a rifle or had military training, but they were committed to learn and they did fast.

They also practiced what they believed in the ranks and created an egalitarian "peoples' army." Rank-and-file soldiers at times elected their own officers and generally shunned traditional military protocol. With them were well-known, or aspiring, writers, artists, composers and filmmakers, including James Lardner (son of Ring Lardner Sr.), Joseph Vogel, Ralph Fasanella, Conlon Nancarrow, Edwin Rolfe, Alvah Bessie, Phil Bard, William Lindsay Gresham and famed author Ernest Hemingway. He supported the "Popular Front," went to Spain in 1937 to report on the war, and spent most of it with the International Brigades.

After the war in 1940, he wrote his famous novel, "For Whom the Bell Tolls." It became a Hollywood film in 1943 and was the top box office hit of the year even though it failed to tell what really happened on the ground. It's the story of a young American in the International Brigades attached to an anti-fascist guerilla unit. The novel's theme is how the main characters react to the prospect of death in a struggle for their vision and how they bond and are willing to die for its sake. It was how Hemingway felt. He spoke publicly on it to raise money for the Republican side he supported.

The "Lincolns" fought bravely and took casualties, including at the town of Brunete near Madrid where half its contingent was wiped out. But they gave as much as they took until Republican forces began losing later in 1938. It took a great toll on both sides, including on the International Brigades as the war continued. It finally ended for the "Lincolns" and other International Brigades volunteers in late 1938. Spanish Prime Minister Juan Negrin struck a futile deal with Hitler to repatriate captured forces and ordered them withdrawn. He didn't understand what others later learned that Hitler didn't make deals. He imposed them.

Of the 2800 "Lincolns," around one-third perished. Survivors came home heroes, got no official recognition for their efforts, were lucky to escape recrimination for breaking the law, but were later harassed and hounded as explained below.

One survivor was its last commander - freedom-fighter, novelist and well-known peace and civil rights activist Milton Wolff. Hemingway described him as "23 years old, tall as Lincoln, gaunt as Lincoln, and as brave and as good a soldier as any that commanded battalions at Gettysburg. He is alive and unhit by the same hazard that leaves one tall palm tree standing where a hurricane has passed." He was part of Spain's bloodiest battles at Brunete, Quinto and Belchite but managed to emerge unscathed.

Wolff arrived in Spain in 1937, trained as a medic, became a machine gunner with the Washington Battalion and then its leader. When Commander Dave Reiss was killed, Wolff took over and led its great offensive across the Ebro and Sierra Pandols. He then went home when the International Brigades left Spain in 1938 but continued fighting fascism as an activist, speaker and novelist in spite of being branded a "premature anti-fascist" and getting caught up in the post-WW II anti-communist hysteria. It affected anyone of prominence who was accused of leftist leanings along with many other "Lincolns" hounded by the FBI, Committee on UnAmerican Activities, and Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB). They lost their jobs and were prosecuted under the Smith Act and state sedition laws although few had convictions hold up.

This was how a nation that defeated fascism rewarded them and then wiped them from the historical record for added shame. They're remembered, however, in the official Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA). The effort was founded in 1979 by Lincoln Brigade living veterans as an "educational and humanitarian organization devoted to the preservation and dissemination of the history of the North American role in the Spanish Civil War....and its aftermath."

It's committed to preserving the memory and record of these heroic freedom fighters and their sacrifices by "continually expanding archival collections in exhibitions, educational programs, publications, and performances (to preserve) the legacy of activism and commitment as an inspiration for present and future generations in working conscientiously and effectively toward a better and more just society" - the one "Lincolns" fought and died for 70 years ago without success.

On the eve of the great war, the Spanish Republic ended on April 1, 1939 when Madrid fell to the Nationalists and then Valencia. It held out under great pressure but gave it up the next day. In the end, the revolution failed from its own divergent ideologies and internal conflicts. They frustrated Orwell enough to say "Why can't we drop all of this political nonsense and get on with the war." It also lost to a more powerful Nationalist force that outmanned and outgunned them because Hitler and Mussolini supplied many more aircraft, artillery pieces, tanks, bombs, small arms and ammunition to give Franco the edge.

It let him outlast Spanish Republican forces that got less aid from the Soviet Union while countries like Great Britain, France and the US stayed technically neutral. But a careful look shows otherwise. Britain and France refused to supply arms or assist the Republican side. Even FDR's government was duplicitous. It pressured the Martin Aircraft Company not to honor an agreement made prior to the 1936 insurrection to sell aircraft to the Republic and also strong-armed Mexico not to ship Republicans war materials that were bought in the US for that purpose. The Mexican government complied and instead sent some financial aid.

Roosevelt said companies supplying the Republic were unpatriotic, but had no such feeling for those trading with the Nationalists like General Motors and the Texas Company, now part of oil giant Chevron. It cancelled contracts with Republicans but sold oil to Franco much like the dealings Charles Highham described in his 1983 book, "Trading with the Enemy." He documented how US corporations like Chase Bank, Standard Oil, Ford, GM and IBM did business with the Nazis in WW II in direct violation of the law. They betrayed their country and got away with it.

The Spirit of the "Lincolns" in the Age of George Bush

In their day, "Lincolns" were anti-fascist freedom-fighters who are still respected by their admirers. Since the Reagan era, however, they'd be called "terrorists" because they oppose unfettered capitalism and all its harshness.

Reagan launched his war on "international terrorism" that was a precursor for what lay ahead. In 1981, his Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, announced the new administration would shift from Jimmy Carter's so-called "human rights" agenda to one focused on anti-terrorism without saying what it was or that it existed. Unexplained then or now is that the US is the world's leading exponent of the very scourge it claims to oppose. Empires have that privilege. They get to have it both ways. They make the rules that others ignore at their peril.

They weigh on many today under George Bush who makes Reagan's era look tame by comparison. Post-9/11, the administration declared permanent war on the world without boundaries in space and time that won't end in our lifetime. It's against any designated countries we target with ones with the most energy reserves and independent leaders topping the list.

It isn't just countries that are in jeopardy. Any group, organization or individual qualifies if they dare challenge US dominance or have views opposing ours. As an anti-fascist group, the "Lincolns" would be targeted because they wanted democratic freedom, not tyranny. During the Great Depression and rise of Nazism, they were galvanized to go to Spain to "make Madrid the tomb of fascism." They'd now target Washington, their struggle would be nonviolent, but it would put them at risk in an unfriendly environment to dissent and a passion to express it.

Today, there's a serious threat at home no different from the extremist ideology "Lincolns" fought against in Spain - the scourge of fascism now in America. It mirrors the Nazi kind that was based on corporatism, patriotism and nationalism; a claimed messianic Almighty-directed mission; authoritarian rule; bipartisan support; iron-fisted militarism; and thuggish "homeland security" enforcers.

It illegally spies on everyone, conducts warrantless searches and seizures, makes unwarranted mass arrests and incarcerations, and can designate anyone, anywhere for any reason an "unlawful enemy combatant" with no corroborating evidence needed. It tolerates no dissent at a time the law is what the executive says it is, and checks and balances, separation of powers, and equal justice for all no longer exist. It's called fascism, despotism or tyranny that masquerades as a model democracy in an America only beautiful for the privileged, no one else. It's what "Lincolns" fought against in Spain, now threatening the US 70 years later.

The dominant media support it and are part of the problem. They use hard right commentators, pundits, and talk show hosts like CNN's Glenn Beck who also hosts a nationally syndicated radio program as a platform for his type extremism. Media giant Time Warner put him in prime time (starting May, 2006) to boost ratings and billed him as "an unconventional look at the news." It barely disguises a hateful hard right agenda. Beck is one of many right wing hawks. He and the others attack anyone opposing the "war on terror" that includes the Bush agenda of iron-fisted militarism, permanent war, repression at home, and gutting social services so the most vulnerable are on their own and out of luck.

Muslims top their target list in the age of "terror." They're demonized mercilessly on-air overtly and by innuendo as well as being harassed and persecuted through mass witch-hunt roundups, detentions, prosecutions and deportations. So are Latino immigrants with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) shock troops the enforcers and media hosts like Lou Dobbs fully supportive. This writer called him "CNN's Vice-President of Racism" in an August, 2006 article that included others like him. They target others anyone voicing dissent at a time getting along demands going along.

The "Lincolns" would be targets if they were active and similar groups as well. They'd be savaged in a typical Beck comment like this one about Muslims: "We need to be....lining up to shoot the bad Muslims (meaning all of them) in the head (and) with God as my witness....human beings are not strong enough, unfortunately, to restrain themselves from putting up razor wire (meaning concentration camps, Nazi-style) and putting you (Muslims) on one side of it....(meaning locked up inside)."

He's serious and is backed by an administration targeting any perceived opposition with hardball tactics that include secretly constructed homeland concentration camps. They're for tens of thousands of aliens and anyone considered a threat to absolute rule.

It's extremely threatening because all media giants are supportive. They fill their programming with Beck-like people while opposition voices are silenced. The scheme is to instill fear and demand loyalty of a government that may have in mind ending the republic, replacing it with tyranny, and it's arguable they've already done it.

Renown print journalist George Seldes saw it emerge during the golden New Deal era under Franklin Roosevelt. If fascism threatened then, it could happen any time, and no democracy is secure without constant vigilance. Seldes monitored it around the world as a

foreign correspondent and at home. He was one of the great independent journalists of his time and did what's practically extinct today outside alternative spaces.

In his 1934 book "Iron, Blood and Profits," he wrote about a "world-wide munitions racket" citing WW I militarists and weapons makers in Europe and America as proof. Fascism was spreading in Europe, and he saw it emerging in America with powerful corporatists behind it. They included munitions makers, industrialists and Wall Street bankers promoting wars for profits. Seldes called them "merchants of death" financing "patriotic organizations" promoting "imperialism (and) colonization - by means of war....the healthfulness of their business depends on slaughter. The more wars (they got) the richer the profits."

They traded with the enemy, sabotaged disarmament efforts, promoted war scares in newspapers, supported dictators, and lobbied and bribed government officials for continued conflict. "The war to end all wars" was just a slogan as new dark forces arose in the 1930s.

Seldes returned to the theme in his 1943 book, "Facts and Fascism," that explained "Fascism on the Home Front" in the book's Part One called "The Big Money and Big Profits in Fascism." In Parts Two and Three, he went into "Native Fascist Forces" in US industry and the media of his day that had far less reach and influence than now.

Seldes was an archetype crusading journalist. He was a "witness to a century" (the title of his 1987 book) until he died in 1995 at age 104. He saw it all by covering the greats and infamous like Benito Mussolini who expelled him for exposing truths he wanted suppressed. So did Lenin after Seldes interviewed him in 1922. He was very hostile to Seldes' honesty that was forbidden by Russian journalists.

Seldes also covered the Spanish Civil War and believed it was a dress rehearsal for World War II. In "Facts and Fascism" he wrote: "Fascism in Spain was bought and paid for by numerous elements who would profit by the destruction of the democratic Republican Loyalist government." He cited generals wanting glory, the right wing conservative Catholic Church, the aristocracy wanting the old order back, and the "force of (big) Money" in Europe and America that wouldn't let social democracy interfere with business. He named names, knew the risks, but was a rare journalist who did what few others ever do - their job.

Seldes passed before the George Bush era, and the "Lincolns" are just a memory in the ALBA archives collection at New York University's Tamiment Library. It's the largest and most important resource available for study that includes their papers, oral histories, films, photos, posters, and selections of the microfilmed records of the International Brigades. They're maintained to preserve a historic record of their achievements, memory and spirit and as an inspiration to others. They represent courageous freedom-fighters who volunteered to fight and die for equality, justice and social democracy. It's never handed to us, is always imperiled, and is only gotten and kept when men and women like "Lincolns" risk everything for it. That spirit more than ever is needed now with America's freedom imperiled.

Sinclair Lewis feared it in his 1935 novel, "It Can't Happen Here." It was about a charismatic self-styled reformer, populist and champion of the common man senator who became president. It was all a front to hide his alliance with corporate interests and the religious extremists of his day. He takes full advantage of The Great Depression, supports a strong military, and gets unconstitutional laws passed during a national emergency. He further convenes military tribunals for dissenters who are called unpatriotic and traitors.

Fast forward to the current era when we're all potential "unlawful enemy combatants," there are no freedom-fighting "Lincolns," and the threat of full-blown tyranny may be one more real or contrived "terrorist" attack away. Stopping it needs the same spirit of sacrifice "Lincolns" made when they risked everything abroad for what they wanted at home. Something to reflect on over the holidays. Something to act on in the new year.

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