



ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE ARCHIVES

Political Activism Then and Now: Lessons of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

Project Advisors:

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Highschool Trimester Course, Bergen County Academies, Hackensac, NJ

Course Description

What motivates young people to become political activists? This is the question the project will address by studying the experiences of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, American volunteers that fought for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939. Students will have the opportunity to learn first-hand what motivated these “Brigadistas” to fight Fascism in a far off land before it was “popular” by examining their archival collection at the Tamiment Library at New York University. Political, social, economic, religious, and cultural conditions in Spain during the 1920’s and 30’s will also be examined within the broader context of developments in Europe during that same period. Students will also analyze the influence of the Great Depression on political activism in the United States. The project will culminate with the students applying what they learned from the experiences of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to determine what political activism means in the 21st century and identify important contemporary causes worthy of struggle.

Learning Objectives:

Upon Completion of this project the students will be able to:

- Conduct archival research and produce original written historical work on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade;
- Examine, interpret, and create art work that contains a political message;
- Identify and determine the importance of propaganda in political activism;
- Determine the impact of poverty, oppression, and discrimination on the radicalization of politics;
- Reflect on, discuss, and debate when is American intervention in another country’s foreign affairs desirable or necessary (i.e. the Spanish Civil War vs. the War on Terror in Iraq);
- Analyze the problems of race, class, and gender in the United States in the thirties and how the ALB coped with them;
- Trace the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 on Spanish and American politics;
- Determine what form of political activism is appropriate for students today;
- Determine the impact of the information revolution on 21st century political activism;

- Verbally present the project culmination utilizing technology including, but not limited to video and power point.

End Product

Please use the space provided to explain the end product that will drive this project and distinguish this experience from that in a regular class. In addition, please articulate how this end product will be conveyed in a final exhibition.

There will be two major components to this project: the historical and the contemporary. The historic component will focus on the experience and activity of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, specifically those domestic and international political as well as personal conditions that motivated them to fight. To answer this, students will conduct archival research at the Tamiment Library at New York University and produce a short paper based on their work. Archival research will present the students with the unique opportunity to experience true historical writing and conduct investigation similar to the type conducted in the legal profession.

The second component, the contemporary, will build on the first. Based on the political activism of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, students will research contemporary causes that are conducive to political activism. They will then present the cause and their plan of activism to the class. This contemporary component is meant to have the students apply what they learned from the project to a real-life issue in the form of political activism.

Expectations

The project is meant to be hands-on and interactive. Class participation is not only encouraged, it is necessary to really make this an enjoyable learning experience.

Like any other history course, there will be required reading that you are expected to complete before class. Please come to class ready to discuss or ask questions based on your assignments. Your experience will be less fulfilling, and your grade will suffer if you decide not to do the readings. A good portion of our class discussions will be based on readings, video documentaries, as well as our research at the Tamiment Library at NYU.

Assessment

Envisioned for this project are three learning outcomes:

1. A written work (5 pages) based on archival research at the Tamiment Library (individual) (25%)
2. Creation of a political poster or work of art that conveys a political message based on a contemporary cause the students choose to take up (individual or group) (25%)

- this assignment will be based on a viewing of political posters from the Spanish Civil War era at the Tamiment Library
3. A presentation about the contemporary cause worthy of political activism and the student(s) plan of action (individual or group) (30%)

The remainder of the grade (20%) will come from class participation, including discussions, presentations, and preparedness.

Individual and group assignment rubrics will be provided to the students ahead of their learning outcomes.

Weekly Activities

This is only a tentative, rough outline of the scheduled activities of the project.

Week 1: March 25, 2009 – The Origins of Spain’s Civil War

Objectives:

1. Students will be informed about the course, its objectives and expectations.
2. Students will learn essential background information about Spain and the origins of the Civil War. Topics covered include:
 - Loss of empire
 - Socio-economic underdevelopment
 - The role and dominance of the Catholic Church
 - Monarchy and Dictatorship: Conservative Attempts to Preserve the old order (1887-1931)
 - The overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Second Republic - 1931
 - Reforms of the Second Republic: For and Against
 - 1936 Elections and the Popular Front
 - Civil War: Nationalists vs. Republicans
 - International reaction to the Civil War in Spain
 - Outcome

Method

1. Class discussion and lecture based on the Helen Graham’s chapter “*The Origins of Spain’s Civil War*” from the book The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction pg. 1-19.

Week Two: April 1, 2009 – Political Parties, Ideologies and Personalities of the Spanish Civil War

Objectives:

1. Students will become familiar with the different political parties, movements, and ideologies that dominated Spanish politics in the 1920's & 1930's. Among the parties/movements/ideologies that the students will study:
 - The parties/ideologies of the Left: Socialists, Communists, Anarchists
 - Liberal parties/ideologies: Radical Republicans
 - The parties/ideologies of the Right: Nationalists, Fascists

2. Students will determine the importance of the role of the individual in the Spanish Civil War by examining the following individuals:
 - Alejandro Lerroux
 - Largo Caballero
 - Indalecio Prieto
 - Manuel Azana
 - Niceto Alcala-Zamora
 - Francisco Franco
 - Jose Calvo Sotelo
 - Dolores Ibarruri ("*La Pasionaria*")

3. Students will analyze the social class conditions in Spain and which classes tended to support which political party and/or ideology.

Method

1. Students will use most of the class period to research the three points stated in the objective. Research will include electronic sources (internet web search as well as the BCA database and book sources provided by the instructor(s)).
 - Noel Valis, ed. Teaching Representations of the Spanish Civil War. Modern Language Association of America, 2007.

2. Students will present their findings to the class in small groups.

Week Three: April 8, 2009 - The Great Depression: American Society in the 1930's

Objectives:

1. Students will determine the impact of the Great Depression on political activism in America in the 1930's.
2. Students will learn about the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as well as:
 - Who tended to join?
 - How did gender relations within the Abraham Lincoln Brigade differ from the rest of American society?
 - How did race relations within the Abraham Lincoln Brigade differ from the rest of American society?
 - What political parties/movements recruited members for the Brigade?

Method:

1. Class discussion based on the following collateral readings:
 - Peter Carroll. The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War. Stanford University Press, 1994.
 - James Yates. Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Open Hand Publishing, Greensboro, NC, 1989.
2. Students will view the documentary **Forever Activists: Stories from the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade**. Upon completion of the documentary, students will discuss what motivated young Americans in the 1930's to become politically active and volunteer to fight for the republican cause in Spain against Fascism.

Week Four: April 22, 2009 - The Abraham Lincoln Brigade**Objectives:**

- Students will have either visited the Tamiment Library at NYU or will the weekend after this class.
1. Students will continue to explore the lives of members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.
 2. Students will examine the role of minority groups such as women, Jews, African-Americans, and others in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.
 3. Students will compare the role of American minorities in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to the Muslims fighting for the Nationalists.

Method:

1. Students will view the documentary **Into the Fire: American Women in the Spanish Civil War**. After the film, students will be expected to discuss what they learned in the documentary.
2. In addition to the documentary, student class discussion will be based on Michael Ugarte's article "*The Question of Race in the Spanish Civil War*."

Assignment:

1. Students will be asked to write a brief (2 pages) essay based on a topic they researched at the Tamiment Library using archival sources.

Week Five: April 29, 2009 - The Arts and the Civil War

Objectives:

- Students will have either visited the Tamiment Library at NYU or will the weekend after this class.
- 1. Students will examine the role of art, poetry, and literature in the Civil War. Based on this lesson, students will create a political poster for their culminating project on political activism.
- 2. Students will also be given time to work on their essay from the previous week.

Method:

1. Students will examine American poetry on the Spanish Civil War by reading poems in Cary Nelson's The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems About the Spanish Civil War. University of Illinois, 2002.
2. Students will also read some of the works of Hemingway, Orwell, and Lorca.

Week Six: May 6, 2009 - Foreign Intervention in the Spanish Civil War**Objective:**

1. Students will identify the countries that directly intervened to support one of the warring sides in the Civil War.
2. Students will research the reasons why countries intervened.
3. Students will research why countries such as Great Britain, France, and the United States remained neutral in the conflict.
4. Students will build arguments for and against intervention in the Civil War.
5. Using the Spanish Civil War and later interventions such as the current "War on Terror", students will begin discussing the merits and drawbacks of U.S. foreign intervention.

Method:

1. Students will research the reasons why the United States remained neutral during the Spanish Civil War.
2. Students will research other conflicts the U.S. intervened in (Korean and Vietnam Wars, the War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, etc.) and prepare for a debate on this issue the following week.

Week Seven: May 13, 2009**Objective:**

1. Students will learn the merits and drawbacks of U.S. intervention in foreign conflicts.

Method:

1. In groups, students will debate the objective above.

Week Eight: May 20, Week Nine: May 27, & Week Ten: June 3, 2009

Objective:

1. Utilizing what the students have learned about the political activism and idealism of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, students will begin to identify the major conflicts and injustice of our current time.
2. Students will create a political poster based on what they learned about political art that reflects the values and goals of their own activism.

Method:

1. Students will do an extensive online search listing the many conflicts and issues that require political action, reform, and change. These issues can be all of the following but are not limited to:
 - Social (class, gender, race, sexual orientation)
 - Political (human rights, foreign military intervention)
 - Religious
 - Cultural
2. Once the students have compiled a list of issues, they will discuss them with the class, explaining why they included these topics and what can/should be done.
3. Students will begin researching more about an issue that they choose to pursue and become active in. They will begin to put together a plan of action that they will present at culmination.

Week Eleven: June 10, 2009 & Week Twelve: June 17, 2009

1. Culmination: Contemporary political activism presentations

Sources

The following sources will be used in the project.

Online:

1. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives - <http://www.alba-valb.org/>

2. Tamiment Library, New York University - <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/tam/index.html>
3. Poetry about the Spanish Civil War (English) - <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/scw/scw.htm>

Books:

1. Antony Beevor. The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. Phoenix Publishers. 2007.
2. E.H. Carr. The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War. Pantheon Books. 1985.
3. Peter N. Carroll. The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War. Stanford University Press. 1994.
4. Peter N. Carroll & James D. Fernandez, eds. Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War. Museum of the City of New York and NYU Press.
5. Harry Fisher. Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War. University of Nebraska Press. 1997.
6. Helen Graham. The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short History. Oxford University Press. 2005.
7. Ernest Hemingway. For Whom the Bell Tolls. Scribner. 1995.
8. Cary Nelson, ed. The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems about the Spanish Civil War. University of Illinois Press. 2002.
9. George Orwell. Homage to Catalonia. Harcourt. 1952.
10. Noel Valis, ed. Teaching Representations of the Spanish Civil War. Modern Language Association of America. 2007.
11. James Yates. Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Open Hand Publishing, LLC. 1989.

Videos:

1. Forever Activists: Stories from the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade
2. Into the Fire: American Women in the Spanish Civil War