

**Fitting the Rules to the Ranks:
A Look into the Nature of Discipline in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade**

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Very recently the Spanish Civil War, the International Brigades, and more specifically the Abraham Lincoln Brigade have been receiving the attention they have rightfully deserved, but have never been given until now. A debate has emerged regarding the volunteers who risked their lives to fight against fascism on the side of Republican Spain from 1936-9: the notion that has somewhat latently existed about the “good fight” waged by the idealistic youth of Depression-era America is now being countered by another perspective, the “dark side” of Communist Control coming direct from Moscow that forced volunteers to stay fighting in Spain and punished them harshly for every kind of military and political dissent. This debate has important implications on the study of discipline (the subject of this research) within, specifically, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and, more generally, the International Brigades as a whole. The more positive view is that discipline was voluntary and self-imposed as a result of such strong political commitment to such a worthy cause: the battle against fascism and the extension of democracy worldwide. The darker side, though, poses the notion that discipline was completely imposed upon the young volunteers by the Comintern, with harsh punishments waiting for any military or political dissenter.

The guiding questions of this research are as follows: What was discipline in the Abraham Lincoln Brigades? How much was voluntary and how much was imposed? And, perhaps most importantly, what did discipline mean to the American volunteers fighting in the Spanish Civil War? What research on these questions has produced, and what the evidence will show, is that while discipline was not quite the ideal of being completely self-imposed with political conviction enough to carry the soldiers through

any and all hardships, neither was it at all the case that discipline came direct from Stalin himself with violent punishments for any individuals who went against the Communist Party line. What emerges is the fact that discipline was, for the most part, something that the International Brigade leadership was working on as the Spanish Civil War was being fought. And for the American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, the discipline that worked was the kind that recognized them as the individuals they were and that respected them as such, taking into account their rebellious natures, strong sentiments of equality and social justice, and of course, the political convictions that brought them to Spain.

The following topics will be covered in order to create a more complete image of the nature of discipline in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: a more in-depth look at the current debate, an examination of both the unique nature of the Spanish Civil War and the American volunteers who fought, a look into the role of Political Commissars and the successes and failures they encountered, a closer look at desertion and how it was dealt with (a crucial element of the recent debate), a case study of the reaction to the imposition of saluting in the ALB when the International Brigades were incorporated into the Spanish Republican Army, and the problems of discipline during and following the first battle in which the American volunteers were at the front, Jarama, and the political and military preparation after the Great Retreats in the Spring of 1938, going into the final battle in which the Americans fought, the Ebro.

To conduct this research both primary and secondary sources were used, both of which present important problems and limitations worth mentioning here. First, however, it is important to note that any study of the Spanish Civil War, and more specifically for

this research the American volunteers who fought, is fraught with political sympathies. This will become more obvious upon a closer examination of the unique nature of the war, but the reason why such radically different interpretations of one event and even of the same evidence about that event, can and do exist is the aura of politics and political ideologies that surround it.¹ The Spanish Civil War was fought on Spanish land, but it far transcended the valleys and rivers on which the battles were fought to take on before, during, and after the characterization as a global conflict between the major ideologies existing in the world at the time it was fought: Communism, Democracy, and Fascism. It is precisely this reason that any research on the Spanish Civil War must therefore look closely at how all evidence is attained, presented, and for what agendas it is being used. A study of the discipline magnifies these difficulties, which is made obvious by the very existence of the current debate. Limitations in the primary sources emerge in that American volunteers themselves had an agenda that promoted the argument for political conviction and self-imposed discipline that seems to have at times overshadowed the possibility for a more complex look into the topic. Interviews conducted after the fact, either soon after (as in the case of the Dollard interviews) or long after (as in the case of the “Good Fight” interviews) promoted this same view, reflecting the agendas of both the volunteers and the interviewers themselves. A secondary source (which includes vast amounts of primary source material) looked at in some depth below is the relatively recent book that has come out by editors Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov entitled *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*. Using

¹ American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, Class Discussion, 18 April 2005

recently revealed material from the Moscow Archives, this text is what makes the argument about the “dark side” of discipline and control in the Spanish Civil War. The problem here is that much of the evidence the editors draw upon is highly decontextualized, making it extremely difficult to see connections between the argument being made and the actual document being presented. Finally, another secondary source of which much use has been made in conducting this research is Peter Carroll’s *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. While overall this is a complete and believable text that does seem to treat all of the major issues surrounding the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, there is an issue of somewhat poor documentation, which made it difficult to follow up much of the evidence presented in the text itself. Also, it is written in such a way that did away with some of the conventions of an analysis of an historical event by looking at it chronologically. Peter Carroll said himself that he produced this work to de-politicize and humanize the ALB and the issues surrounding it.² While this somewhat deals with the problem of the Spanish Civil War as an over-ideologized event, it presents new problems as far as producing a strictly academic piece of work.

In looking at the debate at hand, between the legacy of the “good fight” waged by the American volunteers and the use of new evidence to show an over-involvement of the Soviet Union it is somewhat easier to present the latter than the former argument, primarily because it is has proven easier to disprove the second argument than the first. In the research that has been conducted, the primary source material and the research taken from Peter Carroll’s book point more clearly to the former argument, while the argument

² Peter Carroll, *American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War*, 16 February 2005

made by Radosh, et.al. and Harvey Klehr, et. al. in their work *The Secret World of American Communism* is more easily proven if not false, then at least having gone far beyond what the actual evidence presents.

Apart from much of the other primary sources and Carroll, the source that seems to best and most universally present the argument for political conviction not only as the impetus for volunteering to fight in the first place, but as the momentum for self-discipline during the war are the responses given by American volunteers to the questions posed by John Dollard in the interviews he conducted for his research on “Fear and Courage under Battle Conditions.” In the interviews examined for this research, one thing that all of the volunteers seemed quite sure about was that, “another thing that helps a man to go thru is the strength of the conviction that the thing he is fighting for is right.”³ This, the same volunteer contended, was why “education on the political lines of the ideals involved”⁴ were so important; because if the soldiers know why they are being told to follow certain orders they are far more likely to follow them willingly and well. More can be expected in battle from the soldier who is conscious and approving of the cause that he is fighting to further.⁵ The volunteers were realistic in pointing out that there are moments under the pressure of battle that soldiers may panic or even lose their human instinct for self-preservation. This is why it was so important to prevent panic from running through the ranks, which took a great deal of self-discipline. In describing a case

³ ALBA, John Dollard Research Files for “Fear and Courage Under Battle Conditions,” Box 1, Folder 4, Transcript of interview with volunteer XB: June 17, 1942

⁴ ALBA, John Dollard Research Files, interview with volunteer XB: June 17, 1942

⁵ ALBA, John Dollard Research Files for “Fear and Courage Under Battle Conditions,” Box 1, Folder 4, Transcript of additional interview with volunteer XB: June 26, 1942

when during a particular day of battle so many were killed, but yet they did not retreat, the volunteer states that even when a man was hit he did not let himself cry out. Even though everyone was aware of how bad the situation was, “nobody made himself responsible for causing the move and we held the position.”⁶ Such extreme self-control was made possible by always keeping in mind the cause and the justness of the cause for which the volunteers were fighting. And, the more a soldier fights, the more he sustains in battle, the better he becomes as a fighter; “[h]e clings to his convictions, and gets stronger all the time.”⁷ This evidence shows an ideological overview of how political conviction created self-discipline, which will be highlighted further in the more specific examples that follow later, including especially the discussion of the significant role of political commissars.

In September 2001 an article entitled “Innocents Abroad” was published in *Vanity Fair* claiming that the cheery myth of heroic youngsters who volunteered to fight in Spain, risking everything to fight for democracy, had recently been exploded by new evidence presented in Radosh’s edited work *Spain Betrayed*. Beginning with a quick and incomplete explanation of the rise of the “legend of Spain,” Tanenhaus goes on to describe “a second, or shadow, story of the Lincoln Brigade,” one which seeks to destroy the “most stubbornly enduring political myth of the 20th century: the myth of the virtuous, innocent left.”⁸ While the author makes the claim that this new evidence, or rather new argument, does not mean that the bravery of the volunteers was any less real; however, it

⁶ ALBA, John Dollard Research Files, additional interview with volunteer XB: June 26, 1942

⁷ ALBA, John Dollard Research Files, additional interview with volunteer XB: June 26, 1942

⁸ Tanenhaus, Sam. “Innocents Abroad.” *Vanity Fair*. September 2001: p.103-104

means the conviction with which they fought was utterly unfounded. Using Radosh's book as evidence, Tanenhaus goes on to describe the rigid yet incompetent Soviet control over the volunteer armies in Spain, the violent punishments that took place in the "re-education camps", the internal dissention and distrust between Spanish and American soldiers, the "fragging" of commander Oliver Law, the huge problem of desertion among the Brigades, and the Soviet anxiety about the existence of spies, which Tanenhaus connects directly to the numbers of Americans who simply vanished from the records.⁹ Abe Osheroff, a well-known Abraham Lincoln Brigade veteran is quoted as stating that he and many others refused acceptance of the "dark side of Spain" because, "'If you're driven by the blinding force of passion, you're not going to criticize it,'"¹⁰ which suggests that political conviction has overshadowed the truth of what most volunteers claim to be one, if not the, most significant experiences of their lives. The article finally ends with a hypothetical situation: What would Spain have become if Stalin (there is no mention of the Spanish Republic) had prevailed? The answer: "Spain would have become a dictatorship depressingly similar to the one Franco ultimately installed."¹¹

Radosh, Habeck and Sevostanov make their bold claim early in the introduction of their work: "We now have, for the first time, hard evidence that proves what many had suspected since the beginning of the Spanish Civil War: that Stalin sought from the very beginning to control events in Spain and to manage or prevent the spread of actual/social

⁹ Tanenhaus, Sam. "Innocents Abroad." *Vanity Fair*. September 2001

¹⁰ Tanenhaus, Sam. "Innocents Abroad." *Vanity Fair*. September 2001: p.109

¹¹ Tanenhaus, Sam. "Innocents Abroad." *Vanity Fair*. September 2001: p.109

revolution.”¹² They argue that through the use of “advisors” sent by the Comintern, the International Brigades functioned essentially as a Soviet Army, keeping a close watch on and in turn punishing harshly, any suspected “bad elements,” as they are referred to in several of the Moscow Archive documents.¹³ Especially important for this argument is that volunteers who wanted to be sent home after their tour of duty were not allowed, which lends itself to another part of the argument, that desertion and problems of morale were enormous among the International Brigades.¹⁴ All of the information just presented appears in the editorial sections of Radosh’s book, where he and the other editors make their arguments based (it seems quite loosely) on the documents they selected from the Moscow Archives. What is actually presented in the primary source documents, though, is quite different from these opinions. Rather than confirming the domination of the Soviet Union and the Comintern over Republican Spain and strict military and political discipline it imposed, the documents show that there were huge problems in the organization of the International Brigades, which soldiers, officers, and Communist representatives all had to deal with throughout the Spanish Civil War.

The Secret World of American Communism by Harvey Klehr, et. al, was produced in the same vein as Radosh’s work. The more specific debate Klehr treats is between two contrary views of the CPUSA: first, that it had tight connections with the USSR, never acting as an independent American political party; the second, the revisionist perspective,

¹² Radosh, Ronald, Mary R. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov. *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, Introduction p. xviii.

¹³ Radosh, p. 104

¹⁴ Radosh, p. 234

is that the American Communist Party was a political party like any other, disconnected in its functioning from the Soviet Union. Klehr seeks to prove the latter false and the former true. He argues that even though the Comintern and CPUSA organized volunteer armies for the Spanish Civil War as a Popular Front effort, the reality is that American volunteers were watched very closely and it was of especially great concern to the Comintern that the officers be Communists.¹⁵

A key point of evidence Klehr presents is the suspicious death (which he argues took place for ideological reasons) of Albert Wallach, an American volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. Edward Palega, another volunteer and friend of Wallach, testified twice about Wallach's death. In his first account Palega says that Wallach was arrested when found in Barcelona in civilian clothing and with "alleged" forged papers from the American Consul, giving him protection by the US Government. Suspected as a spy, he was then taken to the prison camp Castle de Fells where he was taken out during the night and never seen or heard of again. In Palega's second account he adds that Wallach was working for the CNT (Confederación nacional del trabajo; an anti-communist, anarcho-syndicalist labor union federation of Spain) at the time of his arrest and that Wallach was questioned by Tony De Maio (who was in charge of the prison) twice before his mysterious nighttime death. Citing "document 47," an International Brigade document, Wallach is stated to having worked as a spy at this time, which Klehr says simply cannot be proved. He also admits at the end of his commentary that, "although the documents found in the International Brigades records and discussed here do not prove

¹⁵ Klehr, Harvey, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov. *The Secret World of American Communism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 16-17

that Wallach was executed, they do strongly point to a death sentence for him.”¹⁶ While Klehr obviously sees the death of Albert Wallach as evidence of the pervasive role of the Soviet Union and its fear of spies among the International Brigades, Peter Carroll tells a somewhat similar story about the, admittedly, mysterious death of this same volunteer, but does not follow it to the same logic as Klehr. Describing Wallach as a liar and a multiple-time deserter and a spreader of rumors among the unit, Carroll admits that he did die in Spain. However, Carroll states clearly that Tony De Maio denied any knowledge of murders having taken place at Castle de Fells, Commissar Gates only admitted to knowing of the death of Wallach but not the circumstances around it, and Palega’s (real name Horan) testimony cannot be proved nor disproved. Carroll lets the story remain an unfortunate mystery while Klehr uses it as evidence of the strict and politically-oriented discipline imposed on the American volunteers by the Soviet Union.

Having stated the arguments for “the dark side” of the role of the Soviet Union in the CPUSA and in the International Brigades, it is important to look somewhat more critically at the evidence Radosh uses from the Moscow Archives, because what they actually present, while somewhat difficult to interpret, is far from the conclusions Radosh has made. In Document 48, what becomes clear is that serious problems existed in the IBs as a result of incompetent officers, chauvinism of the internationals toward the Spanish soldiers, and a desire for repatriation among some of the soldiers¹⁷ (which, given the harsh conditions they were withstanding and the extended duration of their time

¹⁶ Klehr (1995), p. 155-161

¹⁷ Radosh (2001), Document 48, “Copy of a letter from Com. Shtern of 23/6/37.”

fighting, is evidence of pure human nature more so than unduly harsh treatment coming straight from the Comintern). Furthermore, in Document 49, the writer is extremely sympathetic to the feelings of demoralization among the International Brigades, stating that “it is always their weaknesses and failures, never their successes and sacrifices, that are brought to light.”¹⁸ Later on in this document, the writer actually calls for better treatment of the IBs to prevent further damage to their feelings of solidarity in the fight against fascism. Throughout these documents there is reference made to “hostile elements” within the ranks and a concern for the number of deserters, but what is also presented is evidence that these seem only natural reactions given the lack of organization and the conditions of war in general, more specifically the horrific conditions that were experienced during the Spanish Civil War. Furthermore, in Document 51, the need for more adequate political work is that the International Brigades had a poor sense of the “realities of Spain,” not to impose a stricter political discipline based on the Communist Party line.¹⁹

Two more important issues taken up in the documents presented in Radosh’s book are organization of the International Brigades and desertion. While these are huge topics of research, it can be stated briefly that these documents do not prove the strict control of the Soviet Union over the International Brigades regarding organization or discipline. As for organization, it is stated clearly in Document 70 that, “the international units need to work out an organization that is unified, solid, and standardized, somewhat different from

¹⁸ Radosh (2001), p. 243-4, Document 49, “Confidential Note on the situation of the International Brigades at the end of July 1937.”

¹⁹ Radosh (2001), p. 256, Document 51, untitled “top secret” letter, 29 August 1937.

the generally accepted [kind], as it takes into account its specific character.”²⁰ And regarding desertion, in this same document it is stated that when during a military tribunal to punish a Spanish soldier for execution the fact that desertion was said to be “unworthy of a Communist,” was criticized by the author of this letter because party affiliation was completely unrelated and “the tribunal might be composed of anarchists.” Furthermore, regarding the fact that this soldier was executed is looked upon negatively in this document, with the writer asking, “Where were the brigade commander, the brigade commissar, and the commissar of the International Brigades [to help the soldier]?”²¹ It is important here to bring up one problem with the evidence presented here. The frame of reference of the speaker is unclear, because the people who wrote these documents, with close ties to the Comintern, are often shown to be critical of the times when Communism is too present among the International Brigades and they often seem more sympathetic to the situations the volunteers are being faced with than with strictly following the party line. Therefore, the way the evidence is being used comes into even greater question, given the editorial sections provide no guidance as to how these documents should, or even are, being analyzed.

Two short works, one by Peter Carroll and the other by Helen Graham, strongly critique the work done by scholars aiming to prove the dubious role of the Soviet Union in the functioning of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. Calling the work of Tananhaus, Radosh, and Klehr “pseudo-research,” he states that all they have

²⁰ Radosh (2001), p. 443, Document 70, “Notes on the Situation in the International Units in Spain Report by Colonel Com. Sverchevsky (Walter) [14 January 1938].”

²¹ Radosh (2001), p. 455-6, Document 70, “Notes on the Situation in the International Units in Spain Report by Colonel Com. Sverchevsky (Walter) [14 January 1938].”

done is simply to compile facts from the Moscow Archives without looking at all into the origins of the documents or the agendas of the individuals who wrote the documents.

Also, much use is made of lists of names which state political affiliation or, more importantly perhaps, “bad elements” in Radosh and Klehr to prove that any names that disappeared became victims of the strict Soviet discipline and punishment (in other words, that they were summarily executed). However, Carroll makes the point that the existence of soldiers who defied military discipline are present in every army and in every war, and merely the fact that such lists were compiled by the Comintern does not point to anything more than that. Carroll does not deny that the documents uncovered in the Moscow Archives are important pieces of historical evidence; however, he does state clearly that they are difficult sources and as for coming to the kinds of conclusions reached by Radosh and Klehr, “the Moscow archives do not say.”²² One of the main critiques Graham makes in her article is that, “Professor Radosh and his co-editors leave entirely out of account the broader picture of Republican Spain at war. It is as if they see it as a blank screen waiting to be written on by Soviet and Comintern players.”²³ While the documents do clearly show disorganization and fragmentation of the International Brigades and an honest attempt to struggle with these problems by Soviet and Comintern leadership, what they do not show is the attempt of the Soviet Union and Comintern to set up a Socialist Republic in Spain, which is a major part of what Radosh argues.²⁴ In

²² Carroll, Peter. “The Myth of the Moscow Archives.” *Science and Society*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Fall 2004, 337-341.

²³ Graham, Helen. “Spain Betrayed? The New Historical McCarthyism.” *Science and Society*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Fall 2004, 367.

²⁴ Graham, Helen. “Spain Betrayed? The New Historical McCarthyism.” *Science and Society*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Fall 2004, 364-369.

sum, it is clear that the argument presented in the works by authors trying to prove the “shadow story” of the role of the Soviet Union, and the functioning of the IBs in general and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade more specifically, is extremely difficult to accept.

Before attempting to further this debate, going beyond simply the two extremes in the discussion of what discipline was in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and what it meant to the volunteers, it is crucial to identify the unique nature of the Spanish Civil War and the volunteers from the US who went to fight in it. Who the volunteers were has important implications for how discipline worked and did not work, how it was accepted or not accepted, within the ranks of the ALB. The Spanish Civil War was unique because it was political, “a war of ideology,” according to Bill Bailey, an American seaman and volunteer.²⁵ It was also unique in that it was so international. Though the fight was on Spanish soil, and the war was to keep the democratically elected Spanish Republican Government in power, it took on such ideological power that Spain seemed in many ways to have become simply the place where the fight against fascism was located. The volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War were also unique, reflective of the Spanish Civil War itself and the significance it took on as the battlefield where Communism, Democracy, and Fascism clashed in the 1930s. Referring to the volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Bailey said that it was politics that made the difference in the war and the soldiers: “...you were political before you went to Spain, and we remained political while we were in Spain.”²⁶ When the volunteers left for Spain, they

²⁵ ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 41, Interview Transcript: Bailey, Bill (II)

²⁶ ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 41, Interview Transcript: Bailey, Bill (II)

were aware that what they were doing was something new; they were, according to ALB volunteer Morris Mickenberg, the “pioneers of the proletarian army.”²⁷

Though united in their political convictions and belief in the possibility of a better future, the volunteers were individuals. Though many were members of the Communist Party and other far left political parties and organizations, they were even the radicals of these groups. The most common reason volunteers give for why they went to fight in Spain is simply, “I came to Spain because I felt I had to.”²⁸ While this response suggests the decision was only natural, the fact that the choice to risk one’s life, especially fighting for the preservation of democracy in another country, is not at all natural, and it takes a very unique individual to make such a choice. The many Communists who joined in the struggle were at the forefront of many local and world struggles, including fighting poverty (which was especially important during the Great Depression in 1930s America) and struggling against racism, which was also rampant against Blacks in the United States at this time, with the Communist Party the only group taking an active and progressive stance.²⁹ What is also significant is that the generation of 1930s youth grew up with a great fear of war after World War I, and so they were profoundly against war. For these same individuals to willingly put themselves in the position of killing and possibly being killed, was a huge commitment and speaks to the huge sense of struggle

²⁷ Carroll, Peter. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 111

²⁸ Nelson, Cary and Jefferson Hendricks, eds. *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade From the Spanish Civil War*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

²⁹ Buhle, Paul and Dan Georgakas. “Communist Party, USA.” *Encyclopedia of the American Left*. University of Illinois Press, 1992, p. 11-12.

they felt and their belief that to fight in Spain was to fight a “just war,”³⁰ one that needed to be fought to avoid future wars.³¹

The average volunteer among the 3000 in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was a man between 21-27 from an industrial urban center with active labor unions and radical political parties; an individual who was among the working class or a college student, who had suffered from the Depression, and who had a family with a history of struggle and suffering, many of whom were foreign-born or first-generation Americans.³² Many of the volunteers had grown up marching in picket lines, fighting for union recognition, participating in every possible kind of political action; for many, including Abe Smorodan, life revolved around the political action that took place in New York City’s Union Square.³³ Several important groups of people volunteered, including students, artists, and the largest single group of volunteers, the seamen, who deserve special attention. In many sources, it is stated that the seamen, who formed an entire unit within the ALB, were known to be an anarchistic, anti-authoritarian group of troublemakers. Why radicalism flourished among these individuals is somewhat hard to say, but it seems that such an occupation where the men live in their own communities, relatively shut off from the rest of society and the moderating influences that come with it contribute to their so-called anarchistic tendencies. Furthermore, being a seaman affords a worker time to read and think about the world and the various forms of exploitation that they see.

³⁰ Moe Fishman, American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 28 March 2005.

³¹ Nelson (1996), p. 38

³² Rosenstone, Robert A. *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*. New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc, 1969, p. 98-9.

³³ Abe Smorodan, American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 28 March 2005.

While in Spain they brought with them their background of individualism and unwillingness to be shortchanged. As Bill Bailey stated about the seamen in terms of discipline, "...if there were conditions to be got, we wanted them."³⁴ Another significant group of volunteers were artists, perhaps not so much in numbers, but, in the words of Abe Osheroff, "Where, where before or since did you have a situation where poets came to the front?"³⁵ That the volunteers formed such a unique group of individuals is especially important in looking at their experiences and reactions to discipline in the war because all of the men brought with them to Spain their past experiences and lifestyles, which led to conduct among the ranks that veered from that of other soldiers in other wars.³⁶

One of the major characteristics of the Spanish Civil War was the use of political commissars within the Spanish Republican Army, including the International Brigades. The Commissariat was a political structure to mirror the military organization; at each level of command there was a commissar with equal rank to the military officer and the two shared authority at that level. This structure reflected the political nature of the war and the army, especially the charge of keeping the army disciplined lay largely on the commissars, since they were the officers responsible for political education of the troops. In fact, perhaps the best way to describe the commissars as far as their relation to the military structure, was that they served as "buffers between the men and the military."³⁷

³⁴ ALBA 216, "Good Fight" Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 40, Interview Transcript: Bailey, Bill

³⁵ ALBA 216, "Good Fight" Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 54, Interview Transcript: Osheroff, Abe

³⁶ ALBA 216, "Good Fight" Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 54, Interview Transcript: Osheroff, Abe

³⁷ ALBA 216, "Good Fight" Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 41, Interview Transcript: Bailey, Bill (II)

The main role of the commissar was to keep up moral among the troops not only by keeping them up-to-date politically and explaining the political reasons behind military decisions, but also by dealing with such issues as food, clothing, tobacco, and the sending/receiving of mail. Robert Merriman held that the political commissars were important given the composition of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade of strong individuals, because the only way to achieve voluntary discipline from the men was by providing constant political education and explanations of the rationale behind military problems and decisions, because the men were not predisposed to following orders simply because they were given and without good reason for doing so. The commissars and the role they played were truly reflective of the significance of political conviction in keeping the men in Spain and fighting against fascism.³⁸

There are some who argue that the real job of the political commissars was “to keep the army under Communist domination and loyal to the party line,”³⁹ but many more are of the opinion that commissars, though completely political in nature, played a much more encompassing role by making very clear to the men why they were fighting and by keeping up morale and spirit (which often had more to do with daily necessities such as food and tobacco than with politics) among the soldiers as more of a friend than a superior.⁴⁰ This is not to say that the commissars did not play a crucial role as interpreters of and educators on the political conditions of Spain, which certainly was true, but simply having knowledge of the situation and disseminating that knowledge throughout the

³⁸ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 95-6

³⁹ Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 157

⁴⁰ Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 157-8

ranks was not enough to make a good commissar. The relative significance of a given political commissar had much to do with his personality and how he could relate to his men, how well they were able to adapt directives to the social composition of their units.⁴¹ Stated somewhat more bluntly by volunteer Abe Osheroff, “If you were lucky, it [the commissar] was a decent human being who was part of the fight you were in; if you were unlucky, it was some stupid, ignorant bastard who made life more difficult.”⁴² In looking at what made for a good political commissar and what made for a bad one, it is useful to look closely at two political commissars. While both played important roles in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Dave Doran is remembered as a rather poor commissar while Steve Nelson is universally hailed as probably the very best.

In two articles in the *Volunteer for Liberty*, Commissar Dave Doran is praised for the ability he showed in transforming the 15th Brigade into a “disciplined regular army unit.” Remembering the time before Doran imposed discipline among the Brigade, the soldiers are described as feeling themselves too “bourgeois” to follow normal military discipline (such as saluting officers).⁴³ Doran did not believe that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, nor any of the volunteers, deserved any kind of special or different treatment and he saw to it that the volunteers learn “the necessity for strict discipline.”⁴⁴ Peter Carroll, however, tells a somewhat less flattering account of the Commissar. In the case

⁴¹ Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 158

⁴² ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 54, Interview Transcript: Osheroff, Abe

⁴³ ALBA Vertical File, Dave Doran; “Doran-First to Advance-Last to Retreat” by John Gates, *The Volunteer for Liberty*, 1 May 1938

⁴⁴ ALBA Vertical File, Dave Doran; “Dave Doran: ‘Great loyalty, capacity for sacrifice, modesty’” by Lt.-Col. Vladimir Copic, *The Volunteer for Liberty*, 1 May 1938

of volunteer Pat Reade, who made a habit of attacking the Communist Party (being an anarchist and very anti-Communist), unlike Steve Nelson who “matched his arguments and valued his courage,” Doran was not only intolerant, but actually had Reade removed, which was one of the only cases of an American being openly persecuted for his political beliefs.⁴⁵ Another example of Doran’s strictness, which seems to have manifested itself as a lack of humanity while he served as Commissar, was in a quarrel Doran had with Benjamin Goldstein over having to wait for appropriate quarters near Teruel. When Goldstein complained to Doran about having to wait, Doran made it clear he believed it was not the volunteer’s concern, to which Goldstein replied by telling Doran to “go fuck himself.” Doran pegged Goldstein for insubordination, ordering his arrest. Another altercation ensued two hours later (Goldstein had not been arrested due to the intervention of other officers on his behalf) and this time when Doran ordered his arrest, Goldstein was placed under guard. When Goldstein was beseeched to apologize to Doran he refused, claiming, “I believe in conscious discipline, not imposed discipline,” and believing Doran to think himself superior and a “big shot,” he refused to apologize. Finally, for the sake of the party, Goldstein agreed to say sorry to Doran and the entire episode came to an end. Not only does this serve as testimony to Doran’s lack of humility (which it will become clear is a very important attribute in a good political commissar), but it is also important as an illustration of how discipline was very different in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade than in virtually any other army to date.⁴⁶ It is important and

⁴⁵ Carrol, Peter (1994), p. 165-6

⁴⁶ Carrol, Peter (1994), p. 166

only fair, however, to state that Commissar Dave Doran died a hero, willing to charge ahead at Gandessa even if it meant that every man would die, living and dying according to the motto of the commissars: “The first to advance, the last to retreat.”⁴⁷ Therefore, it is not whether or not an individual is a good soldier that makes him a good commissar, but rather if he has a personality that fits him to the job.

Commissar Steve Nelson, on the other hand, was one of the most highly respected individuals (by soldiers, officers, and Americans back home) to fight in Spain. After the Battle of Jarama, the Lincolns were weary, demoralized, sad at the loss of so many friends, bitter about the incompetence of the leadership, and angry at their inability to get leaves from the front. What they were in great need of was someone who could patch things up, which is exactly what Steve Nelson, a veteran Communist organizer from the coal fields of Pennsylvania, was brought in to do. From the moment he arrived on April 31, 1937, Nelson made himself one of the men. This was apparent when on his second day in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Nelson marched with his men (still filthy from the trenches of Jarama) through the streets of Alcalá in a May Day parade, “while smartly dressed General Gal reviewed them from horseback and made a lengthy speech.”⁴⁸ Moreover, he brought with him his experiences from 15 years of participation in the working-class movement in the US, so he knew the kind of men and the kind of political, social, and moral development they all had to have come to fight in Spain. Nelson saw his role as being “to suggest, to stimulate, to cut through red tape and release

⁴⁷ Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 159

⁴⁸ Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 154-5

the men's own initiative.”⁴⁹ While other commissars carried out commands too literally and without questions, Nelson saw the need to adapt the rules to his ranks, which comes with knowledge and understanding of the men: Nelson said, “You must be one of the boys, concern yourself directly with their problems...I trusted the men and they trusted me.”⁵⁰ What Commissar Nelson also came quickly to realize was that while politics was a huge part of his job, the problems of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (and the International Brigades as a whole) were not solely of a political nature, nor did they require solely political solutions. Nelson realized “that morale was a human problem, [and] that it was constructive action, not words, which improved the lot of the soldiers and made them happy.”⁵¹

The description Steve Nelson gives of the role of political commissars in Spain in his “Good Fight” interview reveals (though in a modest manner that seems to have been characteristic of the leader) much about himself and the attributes he had as a commissar that made him so popular and well-respected. Nelson's confidence as a leader in the Spanish Civil War came from the fact that upon arriving, he met men he had known back in the United States, men with whom he had shared trade union and political experiences before leaving for Spain, which gave him a good sense of “how much they're going to respond, knowing their political background, or trade union background.” He arrived at a particularly good time to hear complaints (about food, first aid, trucks, ambulances), to which he not only listened and attended, but walked up and down the trenches looking for

⁴⁹ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 131

⁵⁰ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 132

⁵¹ Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 155

more. He saw the men as the politically conscious individuals they were, realizing that “you could not order these men around like, automatons, you know, turn right, and turn left, and march, and attack and so forth.” In other words, he saw that traditional military discipline was not for this bunch, but rather that in order for them to follow orders, they had to know what lay ahead and why they were being expected to risk their lives (which they were willing to do if the cause was just); and to explain this to them, according to Nelson, was the role of the political commissar. The vast majority of the volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade had no prior experience in battle, which meant they did not have automatic military responses and could automatically overcome fear in battle, and the only way they acquired such reactions was if they were given the reasoning behind every event and the military and political reasons they were presented with every situation. Another point which speaks to Nelson’s humanity and good sense to appeal to the men’s pride is that rather than making an example of those men who made errors, he believed it was crucial to make examples of the men who did things well, to give the men who lagged incentive to improve.⁵² What this example of Commissar Steve Nelson shows, therefore, is that discipline was by no means inherent within the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, but that by appealing to their reason, political awareness, and individuality, the men proved themselves to be excellent soldiers time and again.

It would be impossible to discuss the nature of discipline in any army without taking a close look at desertion; why soldiers deserted, reactions of fellow soldiers and officers, and the punishment those who were retrieved and returned received. However, a

⁵² ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 53, Interview Transcript: Nelson, Steve

discussion of desertion is particularly important in examining the nature of discipline within the Abraham Lincoln Brigade for two reasons: first, it makes up a significant aspect of the recent debate over how and whether discipline was imposed by the Soviet Union; second, it is curious that desertion has formed such a major part of the study of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, given the actual number of deserters from the ranks does not make it stand out from any other army in any other war.

Harvey Klehr takes up the topic of deserters in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, using Document 48, a “List of Suspicious Individuals and Deserters from the XVth Brigade,” to argue that there were serious problems of morale and discipline among the XV Brigade and that to deviate from Communist ideology was considered a crime.⁵³ He goes on to introduce Document 49 with a quote by Cecil Eby stating that twenty-five American deserters demanding repatriation were sent back to Aragon under guard and “According to three witnesses...., these men were later executed.”⁵⁴ What Document 49 (a letter to Bill Lawrence from 9 October 1937) contains is that Americans were in favor of the sentences given to twelve deserters after trials and that they felt it time that a clear position be taken on the issue of desertion. The Document goes on to describe the importance of political education to prevent further problems with desertion and the fact that the soldiers were quite unhappy with Officer Joe Dallet, even requesting his removal from the Battalion, and ends with a statement of the propagandandistic value of the political commissariat and the use of time off from the front to develop political and

⁵³ Klehr, Harvey (1995), p. 183

⁵⁴ Klehr, Harvey (1995), p. 184

cultural activities. What Document 49 never proves, though, and Klehr clearly admits this, is that the deserters were executed. This does not prevent him from stating, though, that “severe problems with morale and desertion among the American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War and the ideological warfare and personal terror directed at some volunteers by their own comrades need to be honestly examined,” which Klehr clearly sees himself as doing here.⁵⁵

Where Klehr sees desertion as having been a pervasive and severe problem within the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Carroll, Rosenstone and several volunteers see it as not only having been a small problem with few deserters among the ranks, but also were quite ready to justify the reasons for desertion by volunteers who did leave the front. It also becomes clear from these authors and veterans that desertion had a particular meaning and was often carried out in particular ways in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (and in the Spanish Civil War in general), which are reflective of the political and individualistic nature of the soldiers. First, although it is difficult to know exactly how many individuals deserted, the number seems small and accounts by veterans confirm this; one estimate puts the number of deserters among the 3000 volunteers at about 100 individuals.⁵⁶ Also important is who was most likely to desert, to which volunteers have responded that it was those who lacked sufficient political conviction in coming to Spain in the beginning; in other words, it was the men who did not have a good understanding of what they were fighting for. This is not to say that fear from seeing heavy casualties,

⁵⁵ Klehr, Harvey (1995), p. 184-187

⁵⁶ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 148

participation in battles (particularly the most brutal ones) and the always poor, especially in the Spanish Civil War, conditions of war did not take their toll on individuals, but given how poorly-off the International Brigades were compared to their fascist enemy in terms of weapons, hospital and first aid services and other conditions, “the rate of defection was minute!”⁵⁷ While Klehr claims that a common punishment for deserters was execution, Brigade policy allowed the return of deserters and then retribution by assignment to a labor battalion, which meant extra time digging trenches.⁵⁸ The “punishment” doled out by Commissar William Lawrence when he was confronted with two American deserters was “a pep talk” to persuade the deserters that the “wise thing” was to return to the units.” As it happens these men did return to the Aragon front; neither was punished for having defected and neither attempted to desert again.⁵⁹

Desertion was also carried out differently by defecting volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade than by soldiers in other armies. For example, several volunteers made attempts to desert more than once (which is only possible if they are not punished very severely after the first, second, or subsequent desertion); groups of deserters might flee together (which hinted at possible demoralization throughout a unit or part of it);⁶⁰ and there is the case of Comrade Marin from the Machine-gun Company who deserted his own Battalion for one in another brigade. The International Brigades responded to this last case in a letter by stating that comrades cannot simply “go off on their own when

⁵⁷ ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 54, Interview Transcript: Osheroff, Abe

⁵⁸ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 177

⁵⁹ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 163

⁶⁰ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 148

they please without the necessary permission” because this could potentially lead to a “complete breakdown in discipline and intelligent discipline is most necessary for quick victory over the fascist enemy.”⁶¹ Also significant is an account told by Steve Nelson about his own response to desertion among the ALB. While walking through the trenches during the Brigade’s time fighting on the Jarama front, Nelson stumbled on a man hiding in a low spot on the ground, away from the rest of his unit. This volunteer pleaded with Nelson to shoot him, but far from it Nelson told the man, “Come on, forget it! Let’s go back to the line,” which the soldier did do, somewhat shakily and expecting to have his rifle taken away from him (which Nelson did not do). Only twenty minutes later Nelson returned to see the same man, with an open chest wound, and yet smiling, proud that Nelson should see this extremely physical manifestation of his bravery. Nelson never told anyone of what had taken place before his injury, but he contends that “if it was in a different army, he might have been charged with desertion, and you know, court-martialed, and in the midst of battle, you know, very often, what they do is, uh, make short work of them. But in our case, we never had to do that to any man.”⁶²

Unfortunately, there is one case of an execution of an American volunteer for desertion that stands out; that of seaman Paul White. Carroll presents his account of White’s desertion and execution with the following foreboding statement: “In the aftermath of the retreats, the brigade leadership resolved to tighten discipline in the ranks—with some tragic results.”⁶³ Paul White was instructed to collect additional ammunition

⁶¹ Moscow Archives, Opis 3, f. 451, letter dated 22 June 1937.

⁶² ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 53, Interview Transcript: Nelson, Steve

⁶³ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 181

during battle, but instead took an empty ambulance and fled. He got as far as the French border when he decided that he could never return home, to his wife and newborn son, with the guilt of being a deserter.⁶⁴ On his way back to the Brigade, he ran into Bill Bailey, who was on leave for the afternoon and who was aware of White's desertion and was pleased to hear he had decided to return. On their way back together, though, White was arrested because he was not in possession of a salvo conducto. Bailey did return, though, and told the other men of White's return, about which all of them were very pleased to hear, admitting that anyone can make a mistake and at that they did not see this as a big one. The next morning, however, a leaflet was disseminated saying that the deserter Paul White had been found guilty after a court-martial and had been executed by a firing squad. Bailey described himself and his fellow soldiers as in a complete state of shock, given that White was the only American they had heard of to have been executed, not to mention the hurt and sadness they felt at having lost a good man and a friend. This feeling turned into rage among the seamen and felt that such a punishment was completely unfounded; that hard labor would surely have sufficed. Bailey said that he assumed the "high command" was hoping to use White as an example that would stop desertions, but the reality is that "it did not stop desertions;" and, in fact, in never stops desertions. Desertion, and the pressure in a person that causes such an action, is "the nature of war...the nature of the human being." Had the seamen been consulted on what to do about Paul White as a deserter, Bailey argues, they would have looked at the individual as a whole human, at his character and at the contribution he had made to the

⁶⁴ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 182

cause, and realizing that anyone can break down under pressure, and the result would have been that “the man would have been still living amongst us today.” Although there was no direct explanation nor admission by the officers or the commissars about Paul White’s execution, Bailey was quite sure that they were aware of the rage and hurt the men felt at what had happened.⁶⁵ This seems to have been the case, given that “that day, the division command reversed its orders, discontinuing the policy of executions,”⁶⁶ unfortunately though not in time to save the life of one man who thought that by returning he “had been saved from wrecking [his] life completely.”⁶⁷ This example is significant because it shows not only that executions were not the rule but the exception, but also that the soldiers (in this case the seamen) were very much human, and just as they knew themselves capable of making mistakes, they were willing to forgive the mistakes of others.

In the fall of 1937, the International Brigades were incorporated into the regular Spanish Republican Army; what followed with this was “that we [the ALB and other IBs] would have to conduct our affairs the way that the regular army did.”⁶⁸ This included saluting to officers, which presents an important and telling example of what discipline meant (or did not mean) to the American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. The volunteers were unhappy with this order because they were used to egalitarianism, such

⁶⁵ ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 40, Interview Transcript: Bailey, Bill

⁶⁶ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 183

⁶⁷ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 182

⁶⁸ ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 65, Interview Transcript: Wolff, Milton (I)

as addressing officers by their first names,⁶⁹ and they were unhappy with the hierarchy and arrogance that saluting an officer and addressing him by his rank and last name implied.⁷⁰

Bill Bailey described the reaction of the seamen, widely recognized as a bunch of anarchists, to the imposition of saluting in the International Brigades. Bailey's logic, and it seems rightfully so, was that there was no reason for an officer to be saluting just because he had the title of officer, given that "a bullet doesn't discriminate when it whizzes, it doesn't say 'this is for a lieutenant,' or 'this is for a common dogface, or GI,' it just says, whoever's in front of it, they hit him!" Bailey said that respect was earned among the men of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and dedication not bars on his chest, earned him such respect. And even though the seamen did blatantly refuse to follow orders about saluting, most of the officers were willing to take that as it came, because they knew "that when the time came for these guys to lug a machine gun and get into action, that they were there."⁷¹

The way in which soldiers were obliged to adhere to the policy of saluting (which, clearly, not all did) is as significant as the fact that many refused. Steve Nelson's solution to a soldier who refused to salute would have been to talk with the man as a friend, explain to him why he was there in Spain and that an army, any army, cannot be without rules and organization and a clear understanding of who is in charge and why, and saluting is nothing more than a recognition of the responsibility of and respect for a

⁶⁹ Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 221

⁷⁰ Carroll, Peter (1994), p. 165 and Rosenstone, Robert A. (1969), p. 221

⁷¹ ALBA 216, "Good Fight" Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 40, Interview Transcript: Bailey, Bill

commanding officer. He admits, however, that if this did not suffice, rather than condemn the man, he would probably send him to work in the kitchen.⁷²

What this research has uncovered regarding the nature of discipline in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade is this: the rules had to fit to the ranks. Discipline, which can mean many different things, did not mean to the American volunteers that they were forced to adhere to strict Communist Party directives and suffer inhumane punishments ordered from the very top Communist leaders in Moscow; nor did it mean willingly taking orders and explanations from a man who did not understand what it meant to be human, to be an individual; and nor did it mean saluting an officer with a perfunctory “*A sus ordenes, mi commandante!*”⁷³ if the officer did not rightfully deserve the title he had and the bars he wore on his chest. What discipline did mean to the Lincolns, however, was that they were willing to do anything, including give up their lives, if shown in a democratic and humanistic way that what they were told to do, what they had to do, would further their cause and political convictions, and advance the fight to end fascism and to further democracy worldwide. The political commissars were successful, if they were, for two reasons: their position and role appealed to the political convictions of the soldiers, and as for the good political commissars, like Steve Nelson, their personalities recognized the soldiers for the strong individuals they were before they came to Spain and which they remained while fighting in Spain. It was the leaders who knew their men and who could fit the orders and directives to the social composition of the men that

⁷² ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 53, Interview Transcript: Nelson, Steve

⁷³ ALBA 216, “Good Fight” Production Materials, Box 1, Folder 65, Interview Transcript: Wolff, Milton (I)

achieved the greatest success in forming a disciplined unit. Political conviction and the fight for social justice is what brought the volunteers to Spain and it is also what kept them there, and while it made them brave and committed soldiers, it did not make them accept military discipline which they did not feel was just. John Keegan and Richard Holmes state in their book *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle*, that “the discipline enforced by firing squad or pistol is inferior to that accepted, self-imposed discipline that characterizes good soldiers.”⁷⁴ It seems fair to say that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade stands as an exemplary case of the truth of this statement.

The debate that is currently raging is giving to the volunteers and their cause some much-deserved attention. Whether this attention is justified for the reasons presented by Radosh, Klehr, Tanenhaus and the others fighting for the “dark side,” however, must seriously be questioned. It is true that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade has been shrouded by the cover of “the good fight,” but it seems that this hides very little. This is not to say that it is not important to further research the topic of the Spanish Civil War and the American volunteers who risked their lives to fight it. This is the reason, after all, that this research was conducted and this paper produced. The only way to further the debate is to look critically and carefully at any and all evidence available. Peter Carroll beseeches his readers to realize that “the archives do not speak for themselves.”⁷⁵ What is more troubling than this, however, is that time is running out to let the volunteers speak for themselves.

⁷⁴ Keegan, John and Richard Holmes. *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle*. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc, 1985.

⁷⁵ Carrol, Peter (2004), p. 337

The Lincolns came to Spain as strong individuals, sure of their beliefs and of their dreams and goals for the future. They had much experience in struggle, be it against poverty or racism, or in pursuit of the right to organize as trade unions or to achieve voice as young people. They brought all of these experiences with them to Spain along with their politics, and just as they remained political throughout the duration of the Spanish Civil War and have, for the most part, remained political until death or still do to this day, so too did they bring with them their individuality and strong sense of self, of fairness and humanity, which they have also held until death or do so to this day. Political conviction and the willingness to fight and struggle, at home and abroad, for a better future and worldwide equality is what united the soldiers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, but this does not take away from a timeless and universal lesson 88-year-old veteran Jack Shafran said just weeks ago, with which the other veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, both alive and dead, would surely agree: “Thank God we are all individuals.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Jack Shafran, American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 11 April 2005

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