

Identity and Commitment: Jewish Volunteers in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War - Lesson and Resource Pathfinder

This is a lesson for a 9th through 12th -grade World History, 20th Century History, or Civics class.

Overview - Methods and Strategies

This lesson requires three to five days with 50-minute blocks. This lesson utilizes ALBA's online lesson [Jewish Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War](#).

By examining several case studies of individuals who joined the International Brigades, this lesson can be used to frame further investigations into the Spanish Civil War, the history of international support for the Republican forces, and the rich resources available from the ALBA archive. Out of 32,000 volunteers to the International Brigades, 8,000 were Jews. At a time of personal crisis, why did so many choose to participate, risking their lives and their futures?

Focusing on the identity of individual participants, and their motivations for risking their lives at a moment of great danger, students will be able to make important connections between this history and their own lives.

Learning Outcomes

During this lesson, students will:

- Reflect on the reasons why people take extraordinary risks at times of great danger.
- Examine the stories of four individuals who joined and participated in the International Brigades.
- Deepen their understanding of the historical context during which these individuals fought in Spain.
- Create life-story maps of these four individuals or similar volunteers in the ALB

Resources (within the site, external links, suggested readings, videos etc.)

- [Jewish Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War](#) lesson on ALBA site
- Selections from [The Volunteer](#)
- External readings

Lesson Activity Description

Begin the lesson by having students write reflectively in a journal or note book on the following questions:

- What does it mean to volunteer? What do people volunteer for, and why do they do it?
- Think of instances in which any of you volunteered for something. What did it feel like to be a volunteer?
- Under what conditions, if any, would any of you decline an opportunity to volunteer? Why?

After journaling, have students meet in pairs or small groups to discuss their reactions to the above questions. Allow 10 -15 minutes for groups/pairs to discuss the issue of volunteering and their personal connections to it

Bring the whole class together, and explain that they will now investigate the stories of several young people who became volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. Depending on the class, and the existing level of knowledge about the Spanish Civil War and the International Brigades, the [Internationalism & the Spanish Civil War](#) section of the ALBA website can be used to provide some historical background.

Begin an investigation of four selected volunteers by first dividing the class into four equal sized groups. Each group will focus on one of the following individuals.

- **Hyman Katz:** Read [Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War](#), focusing on the description of Katz. Read Katz's [letter](#) to his mother.

- **Ed Balchowsky:** Read [Anti-Semitism in the 1920's and 1930's](#), beginning with a short biography of Balchowsky. Watch his [video](#).
- **Al Tanz:** Read [Jewish Spanish Civil War Veterans during World War II](#). Locate the link for [Tanz](#). Additional information can be found in *The Volunteer*, Volume XXIII, Number 5 (Winter 2001).
- **Yekhiel Shulevitch:** Read [Internationalism & the Spanish Civil War](#) for background. Watch his [video](#).

Each group will examine the existing primary and secondary source materials available for their assigned volunteer. In some cases, there may be less available information than for other volunteers. Working together, each group address the following themes and questions:

- **Origins:** Where was this person from? What was his identity, i.e. how might he have perceived himself, and how might others have perceived him? How might these questions of identity have influenced his decision to join the International Brigades?
- **Motivations:** From what you can find out about this person, why do you think he volunteered for the International Brigades? What risks did he take by doing so?
- **Experiences:** What happened to this person during the war? How did these experiences change his self-image, as well as his outlook on society and politics?
- Additionally, each team should generate a list questions they have regarding their person's experiences and his motivations for joining the International Brigades

Introduce the idea of a "life map" to students by asking them to consider how the paths of their own lives can be described graphically as a map or journey. Invite a student to volunteer to sketch his or her own life map for the whole class, or construct your own and present it to students.

As a concluding activity, students will create a life map for one of the individuals explored in this lesson. Students could either collaborate on the person they studied, or be divided into pairs to explore the lives of individuals studied by other student groups. Alternatively, individual students could construct life maps for individuals referenced elsewhere in the ALBA site.

Students, using paper and markers, draw out the journey of their selected person, starting with birth showing the significant people, events, experiences, etc. of their life. Have students revisit these questions:

- **Origins:** Where was this person from? What was his identity, i.e. how might he have perceived himself, and how might others have perceived him? How might these questions of identity have influenced his decision to join the International Brigades?
- **Motivations:** From what you can find out about this person, why do you think he volunteered for the International Brigades? What risks did he take by doing so?
- **Experiences:** What happened to this person during the war? How did these experiences change his self-image, as well as his outlook on society and politics?
- Additionally, each team should generate a list questions they have regarding their person's experiences and his motivations for joining the International Brigades

As a group, pair or individuals, students will present their completed life maps, projecting images, text and video resources from the ALBA site. The focus of these presentations should be to revisit the initial questions regarding motivations people have for volunteering.

Suggestions for follow-up activities

This lesson can be followed by a variety of activities to deepen student understanding both the historical context of the Spanish Civil War and the individual motivations people have for participating situations similar to the International Brigades.

- Students could explore other sections of the ALBA site and/or the archived editions of [The Volunteer](#)
- Students could brainstorm for other historical or contemporary events where people took extraordinary risks at times of great danger. Students could search for commonalities and/or differences among these situations.

Suggestions for assessment of student learning

The conclusion of this lesson offers an excellent opportunity to assess student understanding of the historical development of the Spanish Civil War, the role played by organizations such as the International Brigades, and the humanitarian impulses of people to risk their lives for a cause. An essay assignment could be developed around quotes from the ALBA site, such as some of the personal reflections made by the people studied during this lesson.

Alternative assessments for similar content could focus on the creation of songs, poetry, and artwork by students about someone they've studied in this lesson.