

**UNIT:** THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR  
**TOPIC:** The role of American Volunteers  
**Subunit:** Paul Robeson in Spain

**Aim: Why did Paul Robeson go to Spain during the Spanish Civil War and what did his experiences reflect about African American Volunteers?**

**Instructional Objectives:**

Students will study and learn about Paul Robeson and his involvement in the Spanish Civil War

Students will learn about particular events in the Spanish Civil War

Students will synthesize Paul Robeson's experiences with those of other African American Volunteers for the Republic forces

Students will develop document application and interpretation skills.

**Resources:**

Film Clip: Excerpt from Original version of Showboat (available through the New York Historical Society/American Musicals Project)

Lyrics: 'O! Man River, (available on line)

Document: Comic book/graphic interpretation, *Robeson in Spain*, (available at <http://www.alba-valb.org/resources/document-library/volunteer-june-2009>)

**In preparation:**

Students will have already read and had instruction on the political and social circumstances of the war and the related ideologies.

Students have received and completed as homework initial reading and listed all the characters depicted in the comic book and their role in Spain.

**Motivational:**

Play film clip of Robeson singing original version of 'O! Man River' and provide the same lyrics

Have students compare and analyze the significance of the difference in lyrics as depicted in the graphic novel. Discuss the circumstances in which the original was written versus how Robeson applies it to his efforts in the Spanish Civil War.

Question: What does the change in lyrics suggest about his character at that point (1937)

**Activity Schema and Document Interpretation:**

**A.** Questions for verbal/discussion or written response:

1. What were Robeson's reasons for going to Spain?
2. What kind of Reception did he get from other American Volunteers? from Spanish fighters?
3. What was Robeson's views about America? Britain? France? - *Vis-à-vis* their role in the civil war in Spain?
4. What does Captain Law's experience reflect about the following:
  - a. The attitude toward *blacks* in America during the 1930's? (At this point, the instructor should emphasize that even the common reference to African Americans at that time as *Negroes* reflects the discrimination toward them in both civilian and military life.)
  - b. The ways in which Captain Law's experiences and role in the Spanish Civil War was different?

c. The extent to which women had similar or different experiences in Spain, as reflected in the document?

5. Were Robeson's goals for supporting the Republican forces realized? Explain.

**B. Pivotal Questions:** Were the efforts of the American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War successful? How does the document portray the role civilian volunteerism can play in resolving conflict or supporting particular efforts?

**Summary and Application:**

Ask students if they were to volunteer for a cause outside the US, what cause would they be compelled to support? Where? To what extent would they risk their own safety?

Ask students what kind of role they think the US should have played in the Spanish Civil War and in conflicts today?

Ask students if they feel it is appropriate for civilians from one nation to become involved in the problems of another nation?