

**The Identity Politics of Jews and African-  
Americans in the Spanish Civil War**

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*Para mi abuela, Francisca Cabrega.*

Sarah Sackman  
Cambridge April 2006

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**Abbreviations used in text**

ALB – Abraham Lincoln Brigade

ALBA – Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (Tamiment Library, New York University)

VALB – Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

CPUSA – Communist Party of the United States of America

CEDOBI – Centro de Educación y Documentación de Las Brigadas Internacionales

IB – International Brigades

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Introduction: Defining the politics of identity in hard times

*In July 1936, General Franco launched an uprising against the democratically elected Spanish Republic marking the start of the Spanish Civil War. 3,000 American volunteers rallied to defend the Republic in opposition to fascism. Among them were 1,250 Jews and 80 African-Americans. They called themselves the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.<sup>1</sup>*

A decade before the first bombs rained down on Madrid, Edwin Rolfe and Langston Hughes shared the billing for the “Red Poets Night” in Manhattan. One was the son of Jewish immigrants, the other an up-and-coming black poet. Hughes had rejected the segregated South for the buzz of the Harlem Renaissance in search of an explicitly black poetic voice. Rolfe, by contrast, had already changed his name from the Jewish-sounding Sol Fishman to distance himself from his ethnic background. Their inclusion in the line-up reflected the cosmopolitan nature of the radical Left.

It was not until the summer of 1937 that the poets met again, this time drawn together by the Spanish Civil War. Rolfe and Hughes had made the transition from the fringes of American intellectual life to the battlefields of Spain in defence of a universalist ideal. On Rolfe’s birthday, Hughes presented him with a poem affirming the ideological journey they had taken.<sup>2</sup>

Poet  
On the battle front of the world,

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<sup>1</sup> The first of American volunteers established the ALB within the 15<sup>th</sup> International Brigade. American volunteers served in various battalions, not just ALB.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 1. Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, *Edwin Rolfe: Poet on the Left* (University of Illinois Library, University of Illinois Press, 1990) 30-34.

What does your heart hear,  
 What poems unfurl  
 Their flags made of blood  
 To flame in our sky --

Listen world:  
 Heart's blood's the color  
 Of our banners so red...  
 Urging the wretched of the earth  
 To arise –  
 For the red red flames  
 Of new banners unfurled  
 Are the songs the poet hears  
 On Spain's  
 Front of the world!

Like other American volunteers they believed that Spain was the “front of the world”. She promised to emancipate the “wretched of the earth” and integrate the marginal voices of the Jewish and black poets into the common voice of the Popular Front against fascism.

The Spanish Civil War was a “world war in miniature”. Mussolini mobilised 50,000 troops in support of Franco and the Luftwaffe used the war to test its tactics. In reply Moscow called on the international proletariat to turn Spain into “the graveyard of fascism”. Stalin wrote “the war is not the private concern of Spaniards alone, but the common cause of progressive humanity”. Comintern organised a voluntary army of foreign radicals, the International Brigades, which numbered some 40,000 men and women. The ALB was part of this cosmopolitan Marxist ideal. The workers of the world had seemingly found a way to transcend differences of nationality, ethnicity and creed to form a People's Army. They were the only foreign force to intervene on behalf of the Republic; the Allies followed a policy of non-intervention.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of the Jewish and African-American Lincolns were political radicals. It is estimated that two-thirds of them had some tie to the American Communist Party

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<sup>3</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin, 1977) 461-465

(CPUSA) or the Young Communist League (YCL).<sup>4</sup> These volunteers, who were politically and ethnically on the margins of American society, were willing to risk their lives in a multiracial army for an ideological goal. Doug Roach, an African-American volunteer commented: “The little that I did in Spain was under the inspiration of seeing people of so many races and nationalities fighting together so perfectly against the common enemy, fascism”.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst a voluminous literature on the ALB exists, much of it suffers from ideological distortion. The first accounts, written by the participants themselves, tended to be impressionistic and very much the products of their Cold War context, variously taking up Communist or anti-Communist positions.<sup>6</sup> Invariably, ideology was hailed as the overriding factor governing the Lincolns’ motivation and experience of the war.

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Serious research on the war has until recently been dominated by non-Spanish historians. Under Franco, Republican perspectives were suppressed. Even after his death in 1975, fears that opening up the historical debate would re-open old wounds silenced Spanish analysis. As a consequence the history of the war has been written from an internationalist perspective, largely by historians who share the cosmopolitan fascination that drew the foreign volunteers to Spain in 1936.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (California: Stanford University Press, 1994) 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Davis Jr. “A Small Man from the Cape With a Big Record in Spain” *Daily Worker* 9/1938 ALBA#189.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin Rolfe, *The Lincoln Battalion* (New York: Random House, 1939). Alvah Bessie, *Men in Battle* (NY: VALB, 1939). Art Landis, *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (NY: Citadel Press 1968). William Herrick, *Hermanos* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (NY: Franklin Watts, 1974) (anti-communist)

<sup>7</sup> Cecil Eby, *Between the Bullet and the Lie* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1969) (anti-Communist bias). Robert Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left* (NY: Pegasus 1969) (limited evidence) John Gerassi, *Premature Anti-Fascists* (NY: Praeger 1986) (takes Lincolns too readily at their word)

<sup>8</sup> Giles Tremlett, *Ghosts of Spain* (London: Faber, 2006) describes “la desmemoria histórica” to convey the lack of Spanish historical memory. *El Pais* 22/2/2006 “El complejo futuro del Archivo de Salamanca” <http://www.elpais.es/articulo>. Debates over the ownership of the Civil War archives reflect continuing historical sensitivities surrounding the war.

In the last decade or so, historians working in this field have been assisted by improved archiving at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives at New York University and by the availability of new source material from Russian and Spanish archives. Peter Carroll's book, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, is an elegant, much needed addition to the history of the Lincolns.

In light of these developments, this dissertation has attempted to marry Spanish-language sources with the volunteers' accounts to produce a more holistic view of the war. The hope is that such methodology will encourage future research to explore the connections between Spanish and non-Spanish perspectives on the foreign volunteers in Spain.

The brigade's identity politics, which describe how the volunteers' ethnicity, nationality and cultural background interacted with Left-wing politics, is yet to receive the treatment it deserves. The Old Left analyses of the war ignored the importance of ethnicity since Marxism subordinates ethnic differences to class solidarity.<sup>9</sup>

The motivations and experiences of the volunteers were multifarious. Political, social, economic and psychological factors all played their part and it would be wrong to generalise about a monolithic Jewish or African-American response to the war. Some volunteers considered themselves communists; others anti-fascists or liberals. However a close reading of the evidence suggests that the volunteers' ethnicity and cultural background interacted with their politics in important and complex ways. Being Jewish or black affected how many individuals experienced and interpreted the war even if they were not always conscious of it.

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<sup>9</sup> Robin Kelley "This Ain't Ethiopia But It'll Do" in D, Collum and V, *Black African-American in the Spanish Civil War* sourcebook (NY: GK Hall & Co, 1992) and Gerben Zaagsma's research on French Jews in the IBs (2001-present) are good starting points focused on ethnicity. However, they treat Jews and blacks in isolation, rather than looking for parallels in the groups' identity politics. Earlier work on ethnicity, Al Prago, "Jews in the International Brigades", *Jewish Currents* Feb-March 1979 and Alan Rockman M.A. thesis "Jews in the IBs" are useful, but suffer from source limitations and anachronism.



The Jewish and African-American Lincolns offer fascinating subjects for comparison. The two groups had a deep affinity based on a common victim status and rich cultural exchange. Jewish radicals were at the vanguard of the black civil rights movement. Hitler's persecution of Jews and Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia in 1935 were understood as part of the same racial threat. Black entertainer Paul Robeson recorded Yiddish songs for the Jewish Lincolns whilst Edwin Rolfe sang Negro spirituals in the company of Langston Hughes. Such moments typified Jewish-black relations on the radical Left in the mid-30s.

This new comparative framework will uncover the differences in the ways the Left treated these ethnic groups and in which these groups regarded the Left. Whereas many Jews saw the Left as a means of shedding their ethnicity, black radicals were attracted by its potential for racial uplift. Both groups hoped Spain would allow them to overcome their social marginalisation and achieve integration within the American polity and the international proletariat.

Yet at the heart of the Lincolns' identity politics lay the paradox that their universalism was rooted in a particular worldview. The desire to submerge themselves in the Popular Front originated in their marginal cultural status. For all their pronouncements about proletarian solidarity, the volunteers grappled with multiple conflicting identities.

The "two-ness" of being American and Jewish or American and black, with two souls, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one body, was the dilemma faced by Jewish and black volunteers.<sup>10</sup> They were embroiled in a form of "double consciousness", trapped between how they saw themselves – as anti-fascists, universalists and Americans – and how the world saw them – as extremists, Jews, blacks and un-American. These warring perceptions were fundamental in shaping their experience of the Spanish Civil War

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<sup>10</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: AMclurg, 1903)

The investigation is not primarily concerned with why certain Jews and blacks gravitated towards radicalism but rather what ideological and intellectual challenges they faced in Spain. The study begins with a discussion of the interaction of identity and politics during the Popular Front years and focuses on the CPUSA's construction of a patriotic vocabulary which characterised the volunteers as American rather than internationalist crusaders. The following chapters analyse the journey taken by the Jewish and African-American volunteers from the American Left to Spain.

The constant theme is that of disappointed promise. Spain seemed to offer a means of reconciling internationalist, patriotic and ethnic identities; a multiracial brigade fighting under the name of Lincoln as part of a People's Army. However, the reality of war exposed painful ideological tensions in the Lincolns' identity politics.

#### The Political Background: The American Left in the 1930s

The volunteers were part of the Depression generation. Mass unemployment and austerity appeared to signal the failure of capitalism and liberal government which Marxism had prophesied. The CPUSA organised unemployment demonstrations and relief campaigns to demonstrate that it alone was capable of positive action. Membership of the party jumped from 10,000 in 1929 to 63,000 by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

During this period the radical Left underwent a dramatic transformation. In the early 1930s, the CPUSA lay on the fringe of American politics denouncing President Roosevelt as a "social fascist" and condemning resistance to fascism, which it saw as a necessary stage towards revolution. However, the creation of the Popular Front at the 1935 World Congress of the Communist International marked a complete volte-face with its commitment to anti-fascism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (NY: W Norton, 1992) 174.

Whereas the CPUSA previously insisted on class struggle it now called for collaboration with the bourgeoisie. Where it had once preached internationalism, it now praised nationalism. Popular Front patriotism became a vehicle for integration, not just between socialists, communists and liberals but between Jews, blacks and other ethnic groups. A nostalgic view of the American Republic appealed to many Jewish and black radicals who wished to balance their desire for assimilation with their radical politics.<sup>12</sup>

Jewish student activist, George Watt, who became a battalion commissar in Spain, recalled that “We began to feel that we were really part of the American scene”. “It was no accident that we called ourselves the Lincoln battalion” remarked Moe Fishman “as Earl Browder, who was leader of the CPUSA at the time, put it ‘Communism is the 20<sup>th</sup> century Americanism’. You got to remember that many of the volunteers were foreign born. Most of our parents came from Europe and we were the second generation.”<sup>13</sup>

The CPUSA was the only white political organisation which admitted non-white members and fought vigorously against white chauvinism both inside and outside the party. Its universal ideology embraced all men regardless of race or creed. Inter-racialism integrated all-comers under the homogenous identity of the proletariat. By signing up for Spain the volunteers were, arguably, acting out a communistic version of the assimilationist dream.<sup>14</sup>

The volunteers apparently saw no contradiction between their loyalty to a universal ideology and their loyalty to America. Despite the assertion in the Communist Party manifesto that “the working men have no country”, the Lincolns hoped Popular Front patriotism would miraculously reconcile their warring identities as ethnic outsiders and political radicals. This belief was plainly naïve. If anything, a highly contentious

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Carroll, *Odyssey of ALB 50*. Moses Fishman interview, by author, NY, August 13, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, IL, 1983). Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible* (Princeton University Press, 2001)

notion of what it meant to be American only compounded their identity dilemmas once they reached Spain.<sup>15</sup>

### Constructing the language of Lincoln

Archie Brown attended a recruitment rally in New York, which typified the upbeat patriotism of the Popular Front. With 20,000 people in attendance and CPUSA leaders, Earl Browder and African-American James Ford, among the speakers, “It was a wow!”

They intended to make a real education meeting...Ford outlined the History of the US. He showed that neither Washington, Jackson, Lincoln nor Frederick Douglass were isolationists when it came down to the brass tacks. All of them... cooperated with foreign nations fighting for independence...He cited the fact that Washington was greatly pleased when they sent him the key from the French Bastille. He also cited Lincoln’s letter of thanks to Karl Marx, during the Civil War.<sup>16</sup>

The account illuminates the Left’s efforts to Americanise Marx. Internationalism, radicalism and the struggle for independence were all depicted as traditional American qualities. The appeal to historical precedent placed the Lincolns in a radical American tradition and reassured them that by fighting in Spain they were acting in an American way.<sup>17</sup>

If the language of the Popular Front was the language of America, the language of the Spanish Civil War was the language of the American Civil War. Ernest Hemingway described Jewish major, Milton Wolff, as “tall as Lincoln, gaunt as Lincoln and as brave and as good a soldier as any that commanded battalions at Gettysburg”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> K Marx and F. Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party. (Moscow: Foreign Language publishing, 1888 reproduction) 84

<sup>16</sup> Archie Brown letter to “sweetheart”, 25/2/1937, Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks eds, Madrid 1937 (London : Routledge, 1996) 53.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Denning, The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture (London: Verso, 1996)

<sup>18</sup> Appendix 2. Jo Davidson, Spanish Portraits (NY: Georgian Press,1938)

The naming of the brigades encapsulated how the volunteers aspired to fashion themselves as true Americans. “The men voted on a name for the battalion, selecting Abraham Lincoln as the best representative of how they saw themselves – men who would fight to free the oppressed”.<sup>19</sup>

Following the battle of Jarama, a second wave of volunteers arrived in Spain sufficient to replenish the ranks and establish two further American battalions. The first group voted to name themselves after Tom Mooney, the imprisoned black labour leader who had already lent his name to a machine-gun company. The choice captured the integrated nature of the Brigade. However, CPUSA leaders telegrammed to say that the Mooney case was too inflammatory. Party official, Robert Minor, proposed Jefferson or Washington in keeping with the patriotic spirit of the Popular Front. George Washington, the more conservative, white icon, prevailed. The naming of the third battalion was similarly conservative. The Mackenzie-Papineu Battalion, which recognised the contribution of the Canadian volunteers, recalled two 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-British leaders. The naming of the brigades illustrated the tension between the volunteers’ competing liberal and radical visions of America.<sup>20</sup>

The parallels between the Spanish and American civil wars took on a racial dimension in Langston Hughes’ poem “October 16”. The poem’s publication history suggested the Lincolns’ aim was not simply to defend government by the people but the government by people of all races.

The poem was originally published in 1931 during the Scottsboro trial, which saw the unfair imprisonment of nine black men for the rape of two white women. Moe Fishman recalled the impact of the case: “Scottsboro was crucial. We all became

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<sup>19</sup> Marion Merriman and Warren Lerude, *American Commander in Spain: Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986) 89.

<sup>20</sup> Carroll, *Odyssey of ALB*. 126 Two smaller machine-gun companies were named after John Brown and Frederick Douglass.

aware of the problem of black civil rights. Those in the CPUSA or the YCL were aware of injustice and that we had to fight against it.”<sup>21</sup>

The poem created connections between John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry and the campaign to free the Scottsboro innocents.

Perhaps today  
You will remember John Brown

John Brown,  
Who took his gun,  
Took twenty two companions  
White and black  
And went to shoot your way to freedom  
Where two rivers meet  
And the hills of the  
North  
And the hills of the  
South  
Look slow at one another –  
And died  
For your sake...<sup>22</sup>

“October 16” was republished in the *Volunteer for Liberty*, the International Brigades English-language newspaper of which Ed Rolfe was the editor, on October 14, 1937. This was more than a simple coincidence of dates. The symbolism of John Brown’s militant sacrifice for freedom resonated in the context of the Spanish Civil War. Brown’s cause was after all Lincoln’s cause, and the volunteers were fully aware of the parallels between the integrated battalion in Spain and their predecessors in the Union army.

The “language of Lincoln” was designed not just to boost the volunteers’ morale but also for domestic consumption. A telegram sent home by the ALB to coincide with Independence Day 1937 exemplified this:

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<sup>21</sup> Fishman interview. James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1994)

<sup>22</sup> *Volunteer for Liberty* (14/10/1937) 16.

We, Americans in Spain fighting for the preservation of world democracy, are proud to celebrate today the national festival of our American ideals on Spanish Soil...As Lafayette, citizen of France, urged by impulses which American democrats will honor today, sailed from his own land...so we have offered ourselves to the Spanish government<sup>23</sup>

The telegram epitomised the CPUSA's strategy to appeal to the broadest possible audience. The Lincolns were identified with democracy and American ideals. Tellingly, neither Communism nor the CPUSA gets a mention.

Patriotic rhetoric resonated amongst the Lincolns. Jack Freeman, a 19-year old Jewish student from New York, took particular pride in the American contribution to the war effort. He wrote to his father "in the Brunete offensive the Americans put up a fight that could very well make the world stand up and take notice. Apparently all you have to do is give a Yank something really worth fighting for and then watch him go to town". John Simon, a Jewish doctor serving with the ALB, noted "Today is Washington's birthday. Here we can celebrate it without hypocrisy. Can they say the same at home?" Unlike the telegram, this affirmation of patriotic purpose, was written in a private diary which evidences the volunteer's desire to integrate into an American tradition.<sup>24</sup>

### The problem with patriotism

Despite the rhetoric, the Lincolns' patriotism was riddled with paradox. The radical Left spoke the "language of Lincoln", yet rejected the capitalist, liberal and racialist doctrines on which American society was based. The Lincolns were fighting as Americans, yet the American government legally forbade them from doing so and removed the passports of many returning veterans.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. (29/6/1937) 8.

<sup>24</sup> Jack Freeman letter to pop, 8/12/1937 ALBA#227, Box 1. John Simon diary 22/2/1938, Madrid '37 91.

Dave Gordon, the son of Jewish-Russian immigrants and one of the first Lincolns to arrive in Spain, had a decade earlier been imprisoned for his poem “America”:

America is a land of censored opportunity.  
 Lick spit; eat dirt,  
 There’s your opportunity;  
 Then you become a big man of business.  
 And people take off their hats  
 To you  
 Because you’re a great man;  
 A man  
 Who robs other men by licking spit and eating dirt.

...Holy Christ! You feel lonely in America.  
 America  
 Cracks a cock-eyed laugh at New York harbor.  
 Statue of Liberty: Strong satire  
 On the real America.<sup>25</sup>

Comparing the language of Gordon’s “America” to the “language of Lincoln” reveals the scale of the Left’s ideological shift during the 1930s. Besides the gulf between the “man of business” and the worker, Gordon addressed the particular dilemma faced by the child of immigrants. Liberty’s promise to embrace the tired and huddled masses had not been fulfilled. Gordon work arguably embodied the confusion shared by many Lincolns about whether to embrace or repudiate America.<sup>26</sup>

Although American presence boosted Republican morale, the reception of Americans was frostier than has hitherto been acknowledged. Dan Richardson has argued that the Lincolns were regarded with contempt by the Comintern hierarchy. Black commissar, Harry Haywood recalled Commander Copic’s disparaging comments about the American soldiers: “Pampered by easy living in the States and unprepared for the rigours of battle...the Americans were nothing special”. The IB command viewed the Americans as adolescent dilettantes and originally intended to use them as piecemeal replacements for other units rather than allowing them to form a separate American

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<sup>25</sup> Dave Gordon, “America.” *Daily Worker*, 12/2/1927.

<sup>26</sup> Emma Lazarus, “New Colossus” 1883. Ironically, Liberty’s promise was that of a New York Jew.



battalion. The Lincolns' desire to be taken seriously was thus undercut by the perception that they were not true radicals.<sup>27</sup>

John Simon's diary reflected on relations between the Americans and the other IBs. The Americans, he wrote, were always likely to start singing, which was a sign of their "juvenile qualities". This set them apart from the more "mature" and "serious-minded" European comrades. The Lincolns were regarded as "universally rich" and were identified with the capitalist America their ideology was supposed to reject. They were generally thought incapable of understanding the ideological issues at stake. The Europeans had "seen fascist perils closer at hand than we", whereas the Americans still thought of themselves "across the oceans in the land of Opportunity".

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The Spaniards' knowledge of "*los Norteamericanos*" came from popular Hollywood films. They bombarded the Lincolns with questions "about the skyscrapers (the children thought all Americans lived in them) and the movie stars". The association of the Americans with prosperity and leisure made them popular with local people but undermined their self-image as sober proletarians.<sup>29</sup>

Foreign perspectives on America focused not only on money but on the race question. In James Yates' memoir *Mississippi to Madrid* the black volunteer poignantly describes a conversation with a German comrade about segregation.

- The German asked, "And America, is it true they hang from Blacks from trees there?"

- For some reason that question embarrassed me, but I had to reply, "Yes". I could have told him about the National Guardsmen in Springfield who tried to kick my eye out, but I didn't. I could have explained that my family was in a kind of concentration camp, too, although they were not restrained by barbed

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<sup>27</sup> Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army* (University Press of Kentucky, Lexington: 1982) 77. Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Liberator Press Chicago, 1978) 475-6.

<sup>28</sup> John Simon diary 15/2/38, Madrid '37 88-9.

<sup>29</sup> Theodore Veltfort letter to parents 16/11/37 Madrid '37. 309.

wire. Our wire was invisible except where it manifested itself in signs like “White Only” and where it erupted into a lynching. I could have said that, but I didn’t.<sup>30</sup>

Asked to explain the painful reality of American racism, Yates felt ashamed of the nation of which he was an ambassador as well as a victim. Yet his reticence about criticising America to a foreigner suggests a complex loyalty to the ideal of American liberty. There is a tension here between America as an integrative symbol and as a society which racially excluded the black Lincolns. Popular Front patriotism patently failed to address this contradiction.

Patriotic propaganda belied the volunteers’ confused perspectives on America. Harry Fisher, a Jewish union worker from New York, described a conversation with a local Spanish family whilst stationed at Albacete:

You have a good president” the father said, thinking he was pleasing us...Didn’t he send you Americans here to help us win the fight against the fascists?  
Julia and I were both startled. We had heard that many Spaniards thought we had been sent by the United States government, but this was the first time it was expressed directly to us.<sup>31</sup>

The source demonstrates Fisher was proud to be fighting in the American battalion but perturbed at the association with the American government whose policy he opposed.

For some volunteers the encounter with foreign perspectives on America reawakened their ambivalence towards their country. By adopting the “language of Lincoln” the volunteers abdicated the right to challenge the flaws in American society. Spain exposed the tension between being radical and American which Popular Front patriotism was designed to resolve. Moreover, it compounded the anxiety of

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<sup>30</sup> James Yates, *Mississippi to Madrid: memoir of a black American in the ALB* (Seattle: Open Hand, 1989) 133.

<sup>31</sup> Harry Fisher letter to parents, 10/4/1937 in *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 35-6.

reconciling ethnic and political identities for those Jewish and African-American Lincolns who saw Americanism as a way of effecting their social integration.

Having examined the tensions between the volunteers' American and radical identities, let us turn to examine the particular identity politics of the Jewish and African-American volunteers.

### Jews in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

Harry Fisher's memoir of the Spanish Civil War, *Comrades*, opens in 1934 with Fisher watching newsreels in an American cinema.

I remember to this day the cruel scenes of Nazi storm-troopers with the swastika emblem on their sleeves, dragging Jewish people out of their shops, spitting on them, mocking them, trampling and kicking them...I believed the whole world could be destroyed. I also knew it could happen here.

Fisher addresses the reader's first question as to why he and other Jewish volunteers chose to fight in Spain? Opposition to fascism and a universal concern for "the whole world" were important, but by beginning with this episode Fisher creates a teleological connection between the Nazi anti-Semitic abuses and his presence in Spain.<sup>32</sup>

Fisher's memoir published in 1997 was based on his wartime correspondence yet the impact of the Holocaust, which the description foreshadows, is unavoidable. This complicates the task of the historian attempting to tease out how, if at all, being Jewish affected the volunteers' experiences in Spain. To treat the Spanish Civil War as "the pre-history of the Holocaust" is anachronistic. The Holocaust, the creation of Israel and the collapse of Communism all caused volunteers to re-assess their motivations for going to Spain. Their reconstructed memories of Spain present a

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<sup>32</sup> Harry Fisher, *Comrades*, 13-14.

methodological problem, which must be overcome by mainly using contemporary sources.<sup>33</sup>

The identity politics of Jews in the IBs has received mixed treatment by historians. The role of Jews, who comprised between 16-25% of the IBs, was invisible in the earliest histories. During the Cold War, the Jewish volunteers were ignored by the Jewish Establishment for being embarrassingly radical and by the Left, which refused to single them out as Jews.<sup>34</sup>

Interest in the subject was awakened in the mid-1970s when Jewish participation came to be seen as the first stand against fascism and was used to reject the “sheep to slaughter” narrative of the Nazi genocide. Attention focused on the all-Jewish Botwin Company from Poland, at the expense of Jewish participation in other brigades.<sup>35</sup> The question as to how far Jewish identity played a role in the decision to fight in Spain was debated between the volunteers themselves. Jewish Lincoln, Al Prago, wrote that for the majority of Jewish-American volunteers their Jewishness had little to do with their motivation. He added guiltily “That we could and should have been Jewish internationalists – as were the men of the Botwin Company – did not occur to us”. The debate sparked by Prago’s comments has at least encouraged historians to think about ethnicity as an important element in the story of the ALB. It is from here that I take my cue.<sup>36</sup>

### The Character of the Jewish-American Left

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<sup>33</sup> Cary Nelson in Jeffrey Sharlet, ‘Troublemakers’, *Pakntreger* (1998). [http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/pakn\\_treger/archive\\_Fall98/feature.shtml](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/pakn_treger/archive_Fall98/feature.shtml)

<sup>34</sup> Figure quoted in Prago, “Jews in the IBs”. The precise number of Jews is debated. Estimates range from 5,000-10,000. An exact figure may never be settled upon since many volunteers adopted *nom de guerre* or fought in Spanish units.

<sup>35</sup> Gerben Zaagsma “Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: A case study of the Botwin Company” (MA thesis UCL, 2001). Joshua Rothenberg, “The Jewish Naftali Botwin Company”, *Jewish Frontier* 47/4 (1980) 14-19. Interview with Raquel Sperber. Hebrew University Exhibition (2003)

<sup>36</sup> Edward Lending and Albert Prago, ‘Readers’ forum on Jews in Internationale Brigades’, *Jewish Currents* (May 1981) 34. Prago, Jews in the IBs, *Jewish Currents* (Feb 1979)

Harry Fisher would have done better to begin his narrative in New York's Lower East Side where he was born. Dominated by Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews and their children, New York at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century boasted a vibrant leftist social and political life. The Yiddish socialist press, the Jewish garment unions and Jewish fraternal orders such as the *Arbeiter Ring* (Workmen's Circle) all contributed to a Jewish world in which socialism was a way of life. The majority of the Jewish Lincolns were born into this radical milieu. Fisher himself served in the Local 1250 and joined the YCL in his teens.<sup>37</sup>

These Jews wished to be viewed in a cosmopolitan light. Abraham Cahan, a leading figure of the Jewish Left and editor of the Yiddish-language paper *Forverts*, expressed the desire of Jewish immigrants "to erase all boundaries between Jew and non-Jew in the labour world". A socialist Yiddish press was necessary only as long as the Jewish masses needed it. Once American Jews had made the transition from Yiddish to English and all the cultural changes that that entailed, a specifically Jewish Left would become extinct.<sup>38</sup>

Jewish radicals rejected what they saw as the parochialism, the excessive religiosity, and *Yiddishkeit* (Yiddish culture) of their parents' generation. In *Jews Without Money*, Communist intellectual Michael Gold expressed the Left's violent rejection of the traditional Jewish world and the depth of Jewish self-hatred. Reb Moisha, a religious teacher is described as "a walking belching symbol of the decay of orthodox Judaism...He was a foul smelling beggar who had never read anything, or seen anything, who knew absolutely nothing but this sterile memory course in dead Hebrew". Traditional Jewish society was perceived as retrogressive and close-minded. The only escape route was via the Left. Gold concluded: "O workers' Revolution you

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<sup>37</sup> Tony Michels, *Fire in Their Heart: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) 22.

<sup>38</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (Oxford OUP 1993) ch 3 - 4

brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.”<sup>39</sup>

Many of the young Jewish radicals who joined the ALB were engaged in a generational conflict with their immigrant parents. In the words of one volunteer, “looking back on the Spanish Civil War, you can see the Jews were tearing up roots”. When Harry Fisher’s mother wrote to her son in Yiddish, he replied in English.<sup>40</sup>

Jewish radicals were attracted to the universalist doctrines of socialism. Marxism abrogated ethnicity in favour of universal proletarian solidarity. By allying themselves with other American workers and an international proletariat, Jews were able to shed the specifically Jewish elements of their identity. They felt transformed from a powerless minority into part of a mighty progressive movement.

Historians of the Jewish Left have typically viewed socialism as an agent of Jewish acculturation. Will Herberg’s seminal article of 1952, in which he articulated his “socialism-as-Americanisation” thesis, largely remains the standard interpretation of the Jewish Left.<sup>41</sup> Gary Gerstle and Matthew Jacobson have argued that despite the Left’s support for interracialism, it appealed to Jews because of its power to remake them as white radicals. In the 1930s, the CPUSA went to great lengths to recruit non-Jewish and particularly black members. Many of the Party’s leaders were Jewish and were concerned to dilute “Jewishness” of the labour movement.<sup>42</sup>

The Jewish Lincolns advocated internationalism as the vehicle for assimilation. By fighting in Spain they hoped to transform themselves into new men. They believed

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York, 1946) 29

<sup>40</sup> Abe Osheroff in “Troublemakers” article

<sup>41</sup> Michels, *Fire in the Heart*. 19-20. WHerberg, “The Jewish Labor Movement in the US”, *American Jewish Yearbook* 53 (1952). Arthur Liebman, “Jewish Support for the Left in the United States,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, (1976)

<sup>42</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*. Jacobson, *Whiteness*.

Spain addressed a dual challenge: to transform immigrant Jews and to transform American society by their radical example.

However, what the radicals failed or were unwilling to see was that their universalist principles were based on a particular worldview. It was a Jewish labour movement and a Yiddish radical culture which had given rise to their internationalist outlook. If universalism was attractive to Jewish radicals, it was of a specious kind, for it denied that Jews constituted a particular group. Ironically, those radical Jews seeking assimilation found that a high proportion of their fellow universalists were Jewish. Socialism did not so much Americanise these Jews but instead became identified as a “Jewish” trait.

The cosmopolitan idealism of the Jewish Lincolns masked identity dilemmas which would be rudely exposed in Spain. The confrontation with fascism, the encounter with thousands of fellow Jews in the IBs and the experience of Spanish anti-Semitism caused some Jewish volunteers to reflect on their “Jewishness” and indirectly question the viability of the assimilationist goal they were pursuing. For all the deracialising force of ALB’s socialist ideology, the experience of Spain did not resolve the Jewish Lincolns’ dilemmas. Instead, it raised more questions than answers about how Jews should define themselves in relation to American society and the community of nations in which they lived.

### Motivations

As hope of victory ebbed away in the final months of war Alvah Bessie, a Jewish novelist, reflected on his motives for joining the “good fight”.

My decision to come here was 1. to achieve self integration 2. to fight fascism. Let us admit the first motive far outweighed the second. I wanted a) to work (for the first time) in a large body of men b) to submerge myself in the mass seeking neither distinction nor preferment.



Bessie identified in Spain the chance to realise an internationalist, assimilationist goal common to many Jewish Lincolns. He prioritised this even over the urge to fight fascism.<sup>43</sup>

Jewish Lincolns were motivated to fight in Spain for various reasons and it would be wrong to generalise about a single Jewish response. Jewish radicals responded early to the threat of fascism. Edwin Rolfe warned in the *Daily Worker* in 1934 that “Socialist, Communist – all anti-fascist workers and all anti-fascist intellectuals must band together...in a concerted drive against the Nazi pest – HERE AND NOW!”<sup>44</sup>.

It is difficult to ascertain whether sensitivity to events in Spain and elsewhere in Europe was rooted in a Jewish or Leftist outlook. Just because the war’s context was coloured by the rise of European anti-Semitism does not necessarily mean the volunteers had a particular Jewish motivation to fight in Spain. Moe Fishman summed up the complexity of the radical Jewish response to the war; “We didn’t volunteer as Jews but we felt it [the fascist threat] because we were Jews. We knew what fascism meant for the Jews. We followed what was happening with Hitler. It was logical.”<sup>45</sup>

Evidence of an explicit Jewish motivation to fight in Spain is rare. Al Prago commented that “while they may not have denied their Jewish heritage, they did not go to Spain identifying as Jews. This was particularly true for the American Jews”<sup>46</sup>.

Most rejected the relevance of being Jewish to their politics. Leonard Levenson wrote to a Jewish friend “I can’t help scoffing at your turning to religion. Aren’t you really using it as a nice sandy place in which to hide your head... Were you in Spain you

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<sup>43</sup> Alvah Bessie diary 21/6/1938, ALBA#24 Box 1

<sup>44</sup> *Daily Worker* quoted in Carroll, *Odyssey* 51.

<sup>45</sup> Fishman interview.

<sup>46</sup> Prago, “Jews in the IBs”

would be more concerned with the real devilries conceived by men than with their pleasant gods".<sup>47</sup>

The emphasis was on a universal class struggle rather than Jewish-inspired resistance. Irving Weissman wrote to his parents that "instead of kvetching" (Yiddish for complaining) he wished them to feel pride for their son "who is fighting for you and your class, who is only living the life that you would have lived if you had had the chance, a life devoted to the working class". Weissman urged his Mom that "by learning English you can learn more of what it going on in Spain". By encouraging her to reject her favoured Yiddish, Weissman reflected the assimilationist priorities of a younger generation of Jewish radicals.<sup>48</sup>

There were of course exceptions to the rule. Hyman Katz, a Zionist rabbi, made the direct connection between the suffering of Jews in Europe, Hitler's support for Franco and a Jewish imperative to fight in Spain. He wrote to his uncomprehending mother:

Look at the world situation. We didn't worry when Mussolini came to power in Italy. We felt bad when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, but what could we do? We felt – though we tried to help and sympathise – that it was their problem and wouldn't affect us.... See how the fascists are increasing their power...it won't be long before they get to America...And don't you realise that we Jews will be the first to suffer if fascism comes? ...they are trying to set up the same anti-progressive, anti-Semitic regime in Spain, as they have in Italy and Germany.<sup>49</sup>

Katz's self-identification as a Jew marked him out from the majority of the Jewish-American volunteers, for whom "Jewishness" did not appear to be a specific factor in their decision to fight in Spain.

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<sup>47</sup> Leonard Levenson letter to Herb 15/11/37, Madrid '37 317.

<sup>48</sup> Irving Weissman to parents, 12/2/38, ALBA#165 Box 1 Folder 10.

<sup>49</sup> Hyman Katz letter to mother, 25/11/1937, *Jewish Currents*, April 1986

### Jewish consciousness and the Spanish encounter

The Jewish Lincolns arrived in Spain as cosmopolitan citizens of the world, as communists and anti-fascists. However, the realities of life in Spain challenged this self-image. The encounter with fellow Jews in the IBs, the direct confrontation with fascism and the experience of Spanish anti-semitism forced many volunteers to reflect on their “Jewishness” in new and complicated ways.

The tendency among Jewish-American radicals to downplay their Jewishness is encapsulated in Milton Wolff’s autobiographical novel, *Another Hill*. Wolff, the last commander of the ALB, cast himself as Jewish volunteer, Milton Castle. It is interesting that Castle describes his superiors, Detro and Rupert, as the “All American team leading the Lincoln Battalion”.

White Christians. Should make the folks back home feel good. Made Castle feel good. No bewhiskered, long-haired, red-eyed Jewish Bolsheviks leading the operation...All good clean stock. That was what Castle measured by and did not measure up to. There were times when he felt, inside himself at least, that he did. But not here, not with these two in the same *chabola* (hut).<sup>50</sup>

The choice of adjectives “white” and “clean” demonstrates that the commanders represent an ideal and serve as a reminder of Castle’s own ethnic inadequacy. Here “Americanness” is equated with whiteness and juxtaposed in Wolff’s mind with the “bewhiskered” image of being Jewish which he would prefer to shed.

The Jewish radicals of the ALB fashioned themselves as cosmopolitans through practices such as name-changing. Communists had long favoured name-changing, which protected them and their families against reprisals and gave them a *nom de guerre* that would strengthen them for revolution. The prevalence of name-changing amongst Jewish Lincolns has complicated research into the precise numbers of Jewish-Americans in Spain. Eli Begelman fought as Ellis Beal; Solomon Regenstreit became commander John Gates; the Mendelowitz brothers became Leo and Joe

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<sup>50</sup> Milton Wolff, *Another Hill* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994) 159.

Gordon; and William Horvitz became William Herrick to give but a few examples. A change of name meant a change of identity. Specifically it meant a change to an Anglo-Saxon identity. Despite the ideological commitment to inter-racialism, the Jewish Lincolns tried to submerge themselves into a mass which they conceived as “white”.<sup>51</sup>

Political universalism was intended to drive radical Jewish integration, but in Spain it often had the opposite effect. The significant proportion of Jews amongst the American volunteers mirrored the large numbers of Jews among the IBs as a whole. It is estimated that in total 16% of the IBs were of Jewish origin with over 7,000 combatants from 45 countries. It was the realisation on the part of some of the Jewish Lincolns, who had tended to downplay their ethno-religious origins, that there they were fighting not just in their capacity as Americans or internationalists but in solidarity with other Jewish radicals that caused a subtle awakening of their Jewish consciousness. If universalism was intended as a motor for assimilation, then it was ironic that Jewish-Americans found themselves fighting alongside thousands of other Jews.

One obvious manifestation of this was the use of Yiddish in the IBs. With volunteers from around the world, Yiddish often proved a more practical unifier than Marxist politics in the Babel-like battalions. William Sennett described how useful his knowledge of Yiddish could be. “Not knowing the language is really a difficulty. I can appreciate the problem of a foreigner in the States. My Jewish comes in handy at times (speaking to Germans) but in Spanish I can hardly manage”<sup>52</sup>. Wilfred Mendelson observed that “the real international language is Yiddish. Jews from Germany, France, England, Poland...have come to battle the common enemy of the workers, and of the Jews as a special oppressed minority”.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 165.

<sup>52</sup> William Sennett letter to Gussie, 9/6/1937, Madrid '37 301.

<sup>53</sup> Appendix 3. Wilfred Mendelson letter to parents, 22/6/1937, Madrid '37 40. David Diamant, “Prensa ídish en el frente de guerra español” *Raices*, 28 (1996) 40.

Yiddish was the lingua franca of the IBs and represented for Jewish volunteers a solidarity based on their common Jewish background. That so many Jews had heeded the call of the Spanish Republic suggested to many of Jewish-Americans that they had acted not solely in an American tradition but in a Jewish tradition. Mendelson's letter drives home this point. "Yes, Pop, I am sure we are fighting in the best Maccabean tradition". By alluding to the ancient Jewish freedom-fighters, Mendelson identified a Jewish cause within the broader anti-fascist mission.

The volunteers' Jewish consciousness was enlivened by meeting Jewish radicals from places where their own families originated. Irving Weissman noted in a letter to his father "I'm sure you'll be interested that the 13<sup>th</sup> brigade is the Dombrowski brigade, the Polish brigade – and Christ, how many Jews there are among them". The fact that the contribution of Jews is noteworthy suggests Weissman's pride in their presence and reflects on his own "Jewishness".<sup>54</sup>

In *Another Hill*, Milton Wolff describes another encounter between Jewish Lincolns and Jewish soldiers of the Dombrowski Brigade during the battle of Ebro.

- "...I found them over there...A minion of Polish Jews...all that was left of their section, for all they knew. We conversed in Yiddish." There was pride and awe in Harold's voice. "A minion is a temple and the temple had made the decision to stay and fight to the death..."

- "Oh, come on." Castle was impatient with the tribal accents. "They didn't give you that crap about minions and temples...not the Dombrowskis."

- "If you had seen them, the weary, but determined faces...it could have been Massada, or the Maccabees making a last great stand against the Syrian legions"

- "Oh for Christ's sake...cut this shit out" Castle barked<sup>55</sup>

Wolff, an ideological Communist, always regarded the 'Jewish Question' as a distraction from the anti-fascist objective in Spain. When Castle rejects Harold's

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<sup>54</sup> Irving Weissman letter to father 21/8/38 ALBA#165 Box 1, Folder 12

<sup>55</sup> Wolff, *Another Hill* 376-7. A 'minion' is a quorum of ten men required for Jewish prayer.

“tribal accents” we can detect Wolff’s views which upheld the collectivism of the IBs. When interviewed about the importance of his Jewish background in his decision to fight in Spain, Wolff replied that “it was political besides the Jewish thing”.<sup>56</sup>

However, the fact that Wolff included this episode, whether fictional or historically accurate, is significant. In *Castle and Harold*, Wolff sensitively presented both viewpoints in the “double consciousness” of the Jewish Lincolns. He recognised the precedents of Jewish bravery in Massada and the Maccabees, even as he rejected them. *Another Hill* was, of course, written after the Holocaust. This altered context may have heightened Wolff’s sympathy toward a particular Jewish contribution to anti-fascist resistance.

The level of Jewish consciousness amongst Lincolns was less than that of the European Jewish volunteers. Castle was projecting his own assimilationist worldview, when he stressed that the Dombrovskis “were not Jews but Poles and antifascists” who weren’t “fighting for the Jewish people or the right to form a minion”. In reality, there was a strong sense of Jewish solidarity among the Polish volunteers, so much so that they lobbied for the formation of an all-Jewish unit which became known as the Botwin Company. Whereas Polish Jews had a common enemy in their state, the American Jews actively desired to fight as Americans.<sup>57</sup>

News of the Botwin Company spread amongst Jewish volunteers and across the Atlantic, where the symbolism of a Jewish resistance unit aroused some curiosity. New York’s *Morgen frayhayt*, the Yiddish-language Communist newspaper, reprinted extracts from the Botwin company newspaper, the *Botwin*. N. Buchwald described it as “A peculiar newspaper. From its pages shines a new type of Jewish hero that has already during its life become a legend, the Jewish freedom-fighter”.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sharlet, ‘Troublemakers’

<sup>57</sup> Wolff, *Another Hill*, 377.

<sup>58</sup> Quote from *Morgen frayhayt* reprinted *Botwin* 5 03/11/1938 31. Diamant, *Raices* 43

The idea of a re-incarnated heroic Jew was shared by the Jewish Lincolns. Like the Botwins, the Lincolns craved the opportunity to remake their battered, racially excluded bodies from workers into warriors. A cursory glance at the cover page of the *Volunteer for Liberty* or a selection of Republican war posters reveals how the volunteers were invited to think about their bodies in new ways. The Hellenistic, utopian bodies on display were almost invariably white. The images implied that ethnic identities could be submerged into a homogenous socialist ideal.<sup>59</sup>

The fluctuating desires of Jewish Lincolns to shed their “tribal accents” or acknowledge their Jewish background stemmed from their mixed feelings about what it meant to be Jewish. A visit by Jewish volunteers to a Barcelona restaurant run by a German Jewish family offers a fascinating insight into how they faced up to their Jewishness.<sup>60</sup> In his best Yiddish, Harold Smith, ordered a complete Jewish meal from “Vorspice to Kompott”, describing the restaurant as “another world... similar to a dozen attic apartment restaurants of the same type I’ve eaten in New York”. Harry Fisher shared this nostalgia for his familial Jewish culture “The meals were delicious - just like mom’s. I heard Jewish spoken again. Was I homesick”. Both men were ideological Communists who would have denied that their being Jewish had anything to do with their presence in Spain. Yet this homesickness for Jewish life in alien surroundings suggested a latent Jewish identity.<sup>61</sup>

However, the restaurant’s Jewish clientele also reminded the volunteers of the ties which they preferred to sever. Smith wrote, “Spain is at war with exactly those people who have and are persecuting Jews. But do you think these bastards would do what one would expect any man to do – join in the fight?” Smith referred to the other Jews in the restaurant as “a disgusting lot” who are consumed with the pursuit of profit

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<sup>59</sup>Appendix 4. On socialist idealisations of the body: Amir Weiner “Nature, Nurture and Memory in a Socialist utopia” *American Historical Review* (1999).

<sup>60</sup> From 1933, Spain absorbed several thousand Central European Jewish immigrants concentrated mainly in Barcelona and Madrid. *Retorno A Sefarad*, Jose Antonio Lisbona (Barcelona: Riopiedras Ediciones 1993) ch.4

<sup>61</sup> Harry Fisher letter, 8/7/1938, *Comrades* 132. Harold Smith letter to Jeanette 22/7/38 Madrid ’37 435.

while others fight. He deployed the same racist language used by the fascists to describe his fellow Jews. In his eyes they were “specimens”, “Jews who can’t see beyond the ends of their noses”.

Smith argued that they had failed “their duty only as Jews if nothing else”. This phrase is illuminating in that Smith identified a Jewish duty to fight in Spain, thereby implying that his “Jewishness” provided a basic motivation for being there. “It’s good to know that we have the others of a different type who have proven themselves in the I.B.” Smith understood there to be different “types” of Jew: the profit-grabbing Jews of the restaurant and his Jewish comrades in arms. The volunteers embodied a new type of Jew, combative, idealistic and free of the associations with ghetto life. Crucially though they remained Jews.<sup>62</sup>

When Paul Siegel met with Jewish volunteers from Palestine, he was forced to grapple with the contradiction between Communism’s rejection of Jewish nationalism and his active concern with the Jewish politics of the region. Siegel analysed the treatment of Arabs in Palestine, drawing a direct comparison between anti-Jewish discrimination in Germany and anti-Arab discrimination. “Chauvinism towards the Arabs is even greater than that of Hitler’s Germany toward the Jews. No Arabs are permitted to work for Jews, No Arabs are allowed in Jewish Trade Unions”. Siegel’s sympathy with the Arabs was informed by his knowledge of American racial debates and could be said to mirror radical Jewish sympathy with the condition of African-Americans. For Siegel, the alliance between Jewish immigrants and the British colonialists demonstrated the power of race to mitigate working-class solidarity as occurred in America. It seemed “inconceivable” that Jews, who were the victims of discrimination in Europe, should fail to act on behalf of the Arab population. Siegel argued for class solidarity to transcend race, yet in so doing he identified a particular Jewish duty to fight discrimination against other groups.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Siegel to Mus 18/7/1937, Madrid ’37 328. On Palestinian Jews in Spain : Raanan Rein "Entre Janita y Madrid: Los judíos de Palestina y la Guerra Civil Española", *Raíces*, Summer 2005. Interview with Rajel Sperber, Jerusalem, December 22, 2005.



The Lincolns' direct exposure to fascism in Spain strengthened their anti-fascism and highlighted a particular threat to Jews. In a letter to his mother, Irving Weissman, described the graffiti which adorned the villages of Southern France through which the volunteers passed en route to Spain. "Down with the People's Front, Down with the French Communists who are the agents of Stalin! Death to Stalin! Death to the Russian Jews! Go back to Palestine!". The vicious targeting of Jews brought into focus the Jewish dimension of the anti-fascist struggle. The final insult ordering Jews to "Go back to Palestine" emphasised the fragility of the nationalism adopted by American Jews. Whether in Spain, France or America, Jews were victimised all the same.<sup>64</sup>

The ability of Jewish volunteers to shed their ethnicity depended on the perception of others. In Spain they encountered situations in which, despite their best efforts, they could not escape feeling Jewish. Although racial anti-Semitism was less virulent in Spain than in other parts of Europe, religious anti-Semitism was deeply rooted. The right-wing press was filled with headlines denouncing the Republic's Jewish-Masonic conspiracy. "Comarada! Tienes la obligacion de perseguir al judaismo, a la masoneria, al marxismo y al separatismo" (Comrades it is your duty to hound Judaism, masonry, Marxism and separatism) read one headline. Franco cast himself as the defender of the Catholic kings who had been responsible for the Inquisition against the Jews in 1492. The Inquisition had always dominated the image of Spain in the Jewish imagination.<sup>65</sup>

Wilfred Mendelson wrote:

Spain is perhaps a fit arena for this struggle. Here it was that the Medieval Inquisition drove the Jews from their homes and their livelihoods. Today Jews are returning welcomed by the entire Spanish people to fight the modern Inquisition, and in many cases the direct descendents of the ancient persecution

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<sup>64</sup> Irving Weissman, fragment of letter n.d. to momma. #165, Box 1

<sup>65</sup> Gonzalo Chillida, *El Antisemitismo en España 1812-2002* (Marcial Pons, Ediciones de Historia, 2002). Headline in *Arriba Espana*, 1/8/1936

– the Catholic Jesuit hierarchy – the feudal landholders combined with the finance capitalist oligarchy<sup>66</sup>

Jewish-Americans were made to feel Jewish even by Spaniards on their own side. In a remarkable letter Jack Freeman describes his visit to a Republican hospital not previously visited by the IBs.

“Name?” asked the Spaniard. I told him my first name. He didn’t know how to write it. So I showed him. Then he asks “Father’s name?” Samuel, I say. He looks at me crooked but he writes. After that he wants your name and I tell him Eva. Suddenly he springs up. “Now I know”, he says, “you’re a Yid” and he runs around immediately to bring in his friends in order to show them the ugly animal, a Jew. I must have been, evidently the first Jew that they’d seen in their whole lives.<sup>67</sup>

Freeman was reminded of his Jewish identity by the primitive racial attitudes of the Spanish medical staff. Freeman was painfully aware of the mutability of his identity according to his cultural context. By seeing himself through their eyes Freeman imagined himself as “the ugly animal”. Reading Freeman’s war correspondence in its entirety, it is clear that his ideological commitment to Communism overwhelmed any reflection on his Jewish background. In this case it was not only the Spaniards who were seeing a Jew for the first time, but Freeman who was seeing himself as a Jew for the first time too.

The experience of Spain forced Jewish Lincolns to confront the tensions in their cosmopolitan idealism. They changed their names, changed their identities and worshipped white heroes, all to conform with a notion of universalism which would wash away their “tribal accents”. Spain challenged this naïve belief. The encounter with thousands of Yiddish speaking internationalists, Spanish anti-Semitism and the threat of fascism revealed the truths they had been blind to at home in America. There the labour movement was filled with fellow Yiddish socialists whose universal

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<sup>66</sup>Wilfred Mendelson letter 22/6/1938, Madrid '37 40.

<sup>67</sup> Jack Freeman letter to mother, 17/5/1938. My translation from Yiddish. ALBA #227 Box 1. Freeman wrote this letter in Yiddish when the vast majority of his letters are written in English. This could have something to do with a sense of his Jewishness.

politics were shaped by a particular Jewish outlook. Spain laid bare this internal contradiction and forced many Jewish volunteers to address fundamental questions about their politics of identity.

In a footnote to *Comrades*, Harry Fisher recalled a painful episode retold to him by fellow volunteer Sid Rosenblatt. At the end of the war, with the IBs already withdrawn from Spain, a number of Americans languished in Nationalist prisons. Rosenblatt described how on one occasion he was ordered to strip naked before a pair of Falangist officers. One scanned Rosenblatt's body with a camera. The lens froze upon Rosenblatt's circumcised penis; a reminder to Rosenblatt, should he have hoped to forget, of his status as a "dirty Jew". Such films were used to demonstrate that all the foreign volunteers and all the enemies of Franco were Jews. This chilling episode reveals in the most graphic way the inescapability of the Jewish body and of the identity dilemmas for the Jews of the ALB.

#### African-Americans in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

On November 21, 1987 Chicago commemorated the heroics of Commander Oliver Law and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The event celebrated a native son who became the first black man in American history to command an almost all-white unit in combat. At a time when the U.S. Army remained segregated, the achievements of Law and the other 80 or so African-Americans who served in Spain were historic. The honour was a far cry from the beatings Law received at the hands of Mayor Edward

Kelley's "Red Squad" during the unemployment demonstrations and "Hands Off Ethiopia" campaigns of the 1930s. It was a sign of the changing political and cultural sensibilities that fears of Communism had given way to a focus on America's race problem. Historical imagination had transformed Law and the inter-racial brigade from dangerous dissidents into model citizens.

The image of an integrated brigade which prefigured the Civil Rights advancement of the 1960s was a source of pride to the American Left. Whilst the Cold War and subsequent collapse of Communism discredited radical politics, the progressive achievements of the CPUSA and ALB on the race issue were above criticism. As Moe Fishman put it to me, "you can only write about it in positive terms. Whatever criticisms one makes of the Party, racial tolerance was something the Party gave us which was invaluable".<sup>68</sup>

Such a laudatory view is echoed through the brief historiography of African-Americans in Spain. Wartime propaganda and the Communist press singled out black heroism for praise. In 1980, the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade issued a pamphlet which eulogised the black volunteers with poems and accounts of their gallantry. It was not until 1992 that serious research was immeasurably assisted by the ALB Archives publication of a sourcebook *This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do*. Robin Kelley's accompanying essay offered the first meaningful analysis on black experiences in Spain.<sup>69</sup>

The African-American presence in Spain was extraordinary. However, the celebration of the ALB's interracialism has arguably obscured the identity dilemmas and ideological tensions which arose for the black Lincolns.

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<sup>68</sup> Fishman interview

<sup>69</sup> Joe Brandt (ed.), *Black Americans in the Spanish People's War against Fascism 1936-39* (New York: VALB, 1980). Danny Duncan Collum and Victor A. Berch eds., *African-Americans in the Spanish Civil War "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do"*, Sourcebook from Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (New York: G.K. Hall & Co 1992).

An examination of black radicalism reveals that many black radicals believed that the elevation of black pride represented the best means of bringing about their integration and a “complete end to race”. The twin desires to elevate and integrate themselves lay behind the decision of many black volunteers to fight in Spain.<sup>70</sup>

However, ideologically, ethnic nationalism and proletarian internationalism were at odds. The tension between being proudly black and being part of a universalist movement were often exposed in Spain. Spanish racial attitudes, the confrontation with African troops fighting for Franco and the racial politics of the brigade threatened the delicate balance between pan-Africanism and universalism. The African-American volunteers were not as live to the tensions as their Jewish counterparts. Nonetheless many of them confronted painful questions of identity which challenge the triumphal discourse of African-Americans in the Spanish Civil War.

### Blacks on the American Left

Ideologically, the black volunteers were as much the product of Marcus Garvey and the African Blood Brotherhood as they were of Marx and Engels. A 1930s CPUSA song encapsulated the synthesis of the universal and the particular at the heart of black radicalism:

Negroes ain’ black – but Red!  
 Teacher Lenin done said  
 Brothers all oppressed an’ po’  
 Aint it so? Sho!  
 No Mo’, No Mo’<sup>71</sup>

“Negroes ain’ black – but Red!’ expressed the impulse to integrate. Black radicals sought release from racial degradation and isolation by adopting a cosmopolitan “red”

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<sup>70</sup> Langston Hughes, “Too Much Race” speech to Second International Writers Congress. *Volunteer* 1 no.11 (23/8/1937)

<sup>71</sup> Robin Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1990)130.

identity. Yet the song's lyrical form drew consciously on a particular black cultural device, the Negro spiritual.

The debate between black pride and integration had long dominated black intellectual life. Black Communists railed against the "bourgeois nationalism" of the NAACP and its famous figurehead, W.E.B DuBois, who was at the time anti-Communist. Yet in many respects the ideological tensions they embodied were not so different.<sup>72</sup>

Vaughn Love, who was active in the Federal Theatre Project before Spain, recalled "we were determined to get into the mainstream of American life". The activists understood that to increase their political agency blacks had to improve their status and "speak proper English". There are echoes here with Jewish leftists' rejection of Yiddish. However, unlike their Jewish comrades black radicals did not reject black culture by adopting a Marxist vocabulary.

Black Communists experienced similar generational conflicts with their parents and conservative sections of the black community. Albert Chisholm, a union worker and political cartoonist, described how "My family didn't give me a lot of encouragement in dealing with racism...Black people conditioned themselves to accept all that. Instead of loving themselves, they'd rather love white people". The CPUSA offered an alternative to this meek acceptance by elevating black pride and promoting integration.<sup>73</sup>

The ideological contradiction between pan-Africanism and universalism persisted because of the exceptional attitude of the CPUSA towards African-Americans. In Marxist theory the race issue was subordinate to class struggle. The 1921 Party program declared that "the interests of the Negro worker are identical to those of the

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<sup>72</sup> On black intellectual life – J Smethurst, *The New Red Negro* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999.), David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1989). Robin Kelley *Race Rebels : Culture, Politics, and the Black working-class* (New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994)

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Vaughn Love by Marry Harriman in *This Aint Ethiopia* 169. Interview with Albert Chisholm *ibid.* 145.

white”. However, in 1922 Comintern singled out African-Americans as a nation and in 1928, the Southern blacks of the Black Belt were categorised as an “oppressed nation” who demanded freedom from imperialist oppression.<sup>74</sup>

The nationalist definition elevated African-Americans to a higher social plane. Communists believed that African-Americans possessed a unique revolutionary tradition which harked back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave rebellions. Despite the Party’s commitment to a universal proletariat, on the “Negro Question” it allowed for the expression of black nationalism, which it saw as inherently revolutionary.

The Party’s exceptional attitude towards African-Americans can be contrasted with its attitude to Jews. Communism endorsed African-American culture, but rejected Yiddish parochialism. Stalin’s definition of nationhood, which highlighted the need for black self-rule, was also used to negate Jewish nationalism. James Allen, himself a Jewish radical, argued for black self-determination in *Negro Liberation* (1932), but added that “it would be incorrect to consider the Jews in the United States a national entity...[the Jews] are gradually being amalgamated with the American people, just as other groups before them...”<sup>75</sup>

The CPUSA’s different attitudes towards Jews and African-Americans were both a symptom and a cause of the contrast in the groups’ identity politics. For Jews, the Party’s appeal lay in its cosmopolitanism. For African-Americans, it was the Party’s concession to black particularism, as well as its cosmopolitanism, which drew them into the radical fold.

During the Depression the radical Left campaigned on “black” issues, notably the Scottsboro case. Marching under the slogan “Black and White Unite and Fight”, CPUSA promised to invigorate African-American pride within an inter-racial coalition. Inter-racialism was an integral feature of political life for many Lincolns

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<sup>74</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels* 106.

<sup>75</sup> James Allen *Negro Liberation* (New York: International Publishers, 1932, 1938) 4-5.

before joining the brigade. Moe Fishman commented: “To us acceptance was just normal. Two-thirds of the Lincolns came from the YCL or CPUSA...you couldn’t have been in these organisations without getting rid of your chauvinism”.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly Jewish radicals were the “shock troops” mobilising black activism. The cultural conversation between Jews and African-Americans took place in leftist theatre companies, summer camps and through jazz. The Jewish radicals who disdained any ethnic allegiance of their own paradoxically engrossed themselves in the “Negro question”. By encouraging black presence on the Left, they hoped to assert their cosmopolitanism and thereby dilute the movement’s “Jewishness”.<sup>77</sup>

Despite this appeal, there were few African-Americans on the Left. The nomination of black vice-presidential candidate, James Ford, in 1932 and notable Communist sympathisers like Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes could not raise the numbers of African-American Communists above 1,000, even at the Depression’s height.<sup>78</sup>

The paucity of African-Americans on the Left was reflected in the number of African-Americans in the ALB. Only 2.6% of the ALB volunteers were black compared with more than 30% who were Jewish. Although polls showed that the black community overwhelmingly supported the Republican cause, few saw its connection with their own struggle against poverty and racism. The small number of black volunteers raises the question of whether the black presence in Spain should be regarded as a triumph for the Left. With this in mind, let us turn to examine what motivated those who did volunteer.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Fishman interview.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Buhle and Robin Kelley “Allies of a Different Sort: Jews and Black in the American Left” in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, J Salzman and Cornel West (Oxford: OUP, 1997) 197-208. Bob Steck papers #104

<sup>78</sup> Diggins, *American Left* 171.

<sup>79</sup> Carroll, *Odyssey of ALB* 17. Fishman interview: “Think out of the millions of black Americans how few went. Very few made that connection between Ethiopia, racial discrimination in US and Spain”. Vaughn Love recalled, “the black movement was going well” and he found it difficult to break from what he was doing.



### Motivations: From Mississippi to Madrid

The motivation to volunteer in Spain reflected the ideological synthesis of black nationalism and proletarian internationalism. Three principal motives stand out: firstly, the volunteers, angered by Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, made the connection between fascism abroad and racism at home. Secondly, they hoped to end racial isolation and integrate themselves into a "People's army". Thirdly, the war presented the chance to recover black manhood which had been so degraded by American racism.

Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia internationalised the struggle of African-Americans. In Pan-African tradition, Ethiopia was a symbol of black power and cultural dignity. The message of Psalm 68:31 "And Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth his hand under G-d" resonated with black radicals.<sup>80</sup>

The leading lights of ALB cut their political teeth on the "Hands Off Ethiopia" campaigns. Albert Chisholm recalled "I signed up to go to Spain because fascism was on the march. Italy attacked Ethiopia...It was sort of a primitive society, but nevertheless it was something that Black people throughout the world could look up to because it was governed by a Black administration...I wouldn't be in Ethiopia, but I'd be fighting the Italians in Spain".<sup>81</sup>

The invasion of Ethiopia confirmed the link between fascism abroad and racism at home. Langston Hughes' poem "Air Raid Over Harlem" fused the white on black violence of the Harlem riot in March 1935 with the fascist bombing of Ethiopia in October that year:

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<sup>80</sup> James H. Meriweather, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill ; London : University of North Carolina Press, 2002)

<sup>81</sup> Interview by Jeremy Egolf, *This Ain't Ethiopia*, 145.

...The Ethiopian war broke out last night:  
 BOMBS OVER HARLEM  
 Cops on every corner  
 Most of 'em white  
 COPS IN HARLEM...

Hughes used a technique called “living newspaper”, a combination of poetry and reportage, to link the two events. The puncturing of the verse by headlines and snippets of radio broadcast reflect the disturbance to the black imagination caused by the concomitant rise of fascism and racism. Hughes invigorates the immediacy of the fascist threat in the final lines:

Bombs over Harlem'd kill  
 People like me –  
 Kill ME<sup>82</sup>

Hughes repeated the technique when reporting from Spain. “Air Raid Barcelona” is a direct echo of the Harlem poem. When Hughes sent his stories back for the African-American press the columns were physically broken up over several pages. This meant that the meaning of Spain was literally interwoven with stories about Joe Louis, Scottsboro and the Wagner Anti-Lynching Act.<sup>83</sup>

Most African-Americans needed a particular black motivation for fighting in Spain. James Yates wrote “I had been more than ready to go to Ethiopia, but that was different. Ethiopia, a Black nation was a part of me. I was just beginning to learn about the reality of Spain but I knew what was at stake”. The CPUSA understood the appeal to black particularism and adopted the recruitment slogan “Ethiopia’s fate is at stake on the battlefields of Spain”.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Langston Hughes “Air Raid Over Harlem: scenario for a Little Black Movie”, *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (NY: Vintage Classics, 1995) 185.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 124.

<sup>84</sup> Naison, *Communists in Harlem 194-7*.

Yates rationalised his decision by imagining Spain as a site for the projection of black aspirations for America. In Spain “the poor, the unions, the socialists and the communists had won the kind of victory that would have brought Blacks to the top level of government in the USA. Spain was the perfect example for the world I dreamed of”.<sup>85</sup>

The desire for integration was another important motivation to fight as Canute Frankson, an autoworker from Detroit, explained to a friend: “we are no longer an isolated group fighting hopelessly against an immense giant because we have become an active part of a great progressive force”. Frankson saw the Left’s universalism as a vehicle for black integration. He empathised with the suffering of white workers in America and abroad. “These same people are as hungry as we are...They are our fellowmen...We will build us a new society – a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line...That is why I’m here in Spain.”<sup>86</sup>

On the ship to France, Frankson found the dining hall segregated. The other Lincoln volunteers noticed his isolation and joined him out of protest.

Those people on board...were all whites, and strangers to me...They are the people who represent progress and democracy...The sad thing about it all is that it is from such people that our so-called leaders would separate us...Their preaching of isolation is a plan to continue the system of segregation. The Negro who opposes unity while he preaches race loyalty and race consciousness is by far the worst of the enemies.<sup>87</sup>

Like other black radicals, Frankson wished to lift Du Bois’ proverbial veil and transcend the barriers separating blacks and whites. He criticised the NAACP for perpetuating segregation, yet he failed to realise that his own desire for universal solidarity was rooted in a particular history of anti-black abuse.

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<sup>85</sup> Yates, Mississippi to Madrid 95-6

<sup>86</sup> Canute Frankson to friend, 6/7/1937, Madrid ’37 34-5.

<sup>87</sup> Canute Frankson to friend 23/7/1937, Madrid ’37 60.

Another reason for African-Americans to join ALB was to recover a sense of manhood. It had long been recognised that “submission to civic inferiority...is bound to sap the manhood of any race”.<sup>88</sup> Frankson wrote of the fragmentation of the black body. Our history is “stained with the blood of Negroes; bitter with the groans of our tortured loved ones from whose living bodies ears, fingers, toes have been cut as souvenirs”. The experience of racial violence and the emasculating effect of unemployment filled the black volunteers’ accounts of their lives before Spain. James Yates wrote that he found it hard to overcome the feeling “I was half a man”<sup>89</sup>

The ALB with its virtues of work, struggle and revolutionary spirit offered a tonic of manliness. Like their Jewish counterparts, black radicals sought to refashion themselves as “new men”. Spain provided a chance to display physical prowess, independence and self-mastery. The interests of black pride and Communist ideology converged on the idea of the regeneration of the body. Though racial particularism and universalism were intellectually at odds, they appeared to find common ground on the terrain of gender.<sup>90</sup>

Unlike their Jewish comrades, the black Lincolns went to Spain as ambassadors for their race. However, what follows is a discussion of Spain’s failure to satisfy their idealism as she unmasked the contradiction between black pride and the desire for integration.

#### “Letter from Spain”: African-Americans at the Spanish Front

A Republican war poster depicted the faces of black, white and Asian soldier beneath the star of the IBs. The slogan - “Todos los pueblos del mundo estan en las brigadas internacionales al lado del pueblo español” (All the people of the world are in the IBs

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<sup>88</sup> DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*. 37

<sup>89</sup> Yates, *Mississippi to Madrid* 106. An extensive literature on black manhood exists. See Martin Summers, *Manliness and its discontents 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC : University of North Carolina Press, c2004).

<sup>90</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels* 112.

alongside the Spanish people) encapsulated the Popular Front's inter-racialism, which so appealed to the black Lincolns. However, the poster was not simply a statement of ideology but an educational tool, designed to temper Spanish racism towards foreign volunteers. The poster thus embodied the disparity between the expectation and reality which shaped black experiences of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>91</sup>

Franco launched his rebellion from Spanish Morocco with 30,000 Moroccan mercenaries heading his attack. The Moorish soldiers were renowned for their brutality. Spaniards and IBs alike expressed their fear of the troops in racist terms. A pamphlet issued by the Republican Propaganda Ministry depicted the invasion of "los moros" with a photomontage of a white peasant farmer confronting three traditionally dressed Moroccans. The caption read "El Castellano que perdiera a su hijo en Marruecos tuvo que ver la plaza de su pueblo convertido en zoco marroqui" (The Castilian who had lost his son in Morocco was forced to witness his town square converted into a Moroccan bazaar). The pamphlet appealed to historic Spanish prejudices, contrasting the rapacious African with the noble white Castilian.<sup>92</sup>

Crude racism ran through Republican propaganda. One poster entitled "Fuera el invasor" (Out with the invader!) portrayed a Moorish soldier as an ape-like creature.<sup>93</sup> Another entitled "Los Nacionales" (The Nationalists) caricatured the Moors as Franco's Fez-wearing stooges.<sup>94</sup>

Precisely what the African-American volunteers thought of such racism is unclear. Perhaps they were unaware of it or blinded by ideology deliberately ignored it. What is clear is that the presence of Moorish troops posed a serious identity dilemma for the black Lincolns.

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<sup>91</sup> Appendix 5

<sup>92</sup> *Pequena Historia Grafica de la Lucha Espanola*, Ministerio de Propaganda de la Republica Espanola (S.L. Sevilla-Valencia, 1937) Marx Memorial Library Box 27a

<sup>93</sup> Appendix 6

<sup>94</sup> Appendix 7

In a radio broadcast from Madrid, Louise Thompson, black secretary of the International Workers Order, discussed African-American reactions to the Moorish presence. Thompson's reason for being in Spain was "to see with my own eyes the difference between these two dark-skinned people fighting on opposite sides of the struggle". She was keen to differentiate the Moroccan "dupes" from the African-American Lincolns. The suggestion was that their fighting for the fascists had undermined pan-African solidarity.<sup>95</sup>

Langston Hughes dwelt on the Moorish dilemma in his news reports. In contrast to Republican propaganda, Hughes suggested that the "Moroccan invasion" ironically represented a return to the country which the Moors dominated for seven centuries (711-1492). By according them their status as former rulers, Hughes' was sympathetically aligning the Moors with the defeated Ethiopians. He was at pains to point out that in the IBs, black soldiers served as volunteers and rose to commanding positions, whereas in Franco's army the Moorish soldiers were used as cannon fodder.<sup>96</sup>

Hughes' poem "Letter From Spain Addressed to Alabama", which describes the encounter between Johnny, an African-American soldier, and a dying Moorish captive, explores the painful situation in which Blacks were killing Blacks.

We captured a wounded Moor today.  
 He was just as dark as me.  
 I said, Boy, what you been doing here  
 Fightin' against the free?

He answered something in a language  
 I couldn't understand.  
 But somebody told me he was sayin'  
 They nabbed him in his land

And made him join the fascist army

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Louise Thompson, *Daily Worker*, 20/9/1937. This Aint Ethiopia, 119.

<sup>96</sup> "Hughes Finds Moors Being Used as Pawns by Fascists in Spain," *Afro-American*, 30/10/1937. De Santis ed, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics and World Affairs* (London: University of Missouri Press) 161.

And come across to Spain  
 And he said he had a feelin'  
 He'd never get back home again (...)

And as he lay there dying  
 In a village we had taken,  
 I looked across to Africa  
 And seed foundations shakin'

Cause if a free Spain wins this war,  
 The colonies, too, are free-  
 Then something wonderful'll happen  
 To them dark Moors and me (...)

I knelt down there beside him,  
 And I took his hand –  
 But the wounded Moor was dyin'  
 And he didn't understand.<sup>97</sup>

“Letter from Spain” expressed the interplay between racial politics and Spain’s meaning for the African-Americans. Racial empathy between Johnny and the Moroccan is conveyed by the repeated phrase “as dark as me”. Both share the experience of slavery, whether as a colonial subject, as Franco’s conscript or as a slave to American capitalism. Johnny’s attentions are turned away from the Dixie to the “seed foundations” of Africa, which embodies the potential for black empowerment if a free Spain is victorious. However, the pan-African sensitivity of the poem only heightens the painful reality of Africans killing Africans. The ambivalent final lines, “the wounded Moor was dyin’/ And he didn’t understand” breaks the rhetorical link between the African brothers suggesting perhaps that black solidarity has become the victim of a white man’s war.

The poetic language implies the tension between being proudly black and fully integrated in the ALB. Johnny’s black vernacular is created by the dropping of the ‘g’ from the words ‘sayin’, ‘feelin’ and ‘dyin’’. However, when Hughes read the poem to the soldiers, some “objected to the lack of correct grammar and the slightly broken

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<sup>97</sup> Hughes, Letter from Spain Addressed to Alabama, *Volunteer for Liberty* November 1937. Collected Poems, 201.

English that I had used in these Letters. They said that many of their Negro comrades in arms were well educated; furthermore, I might mistakenly be aiding in perpetuating a stereotype”. Neither black nor white volunteers wished to distinguish a black voice. Instead they unwittingly subscribed to a homogeneous vernacular, demonstrating that all comrades were equally capable of sounding “white”.<sup>98</sup>

Spanish racial attitudes further complicated black identity politics. Most Spaniards had never seen a black person before and their reactions veered from curiosity to outright racism. The volunteers often misread these responses. Hughes reported that “Colored people are not strange to Spain nor do they attract an undue amount of attention...All the colored people to whom I’ve talked agree that there is not the slightest trace of color prejudice to be found”. Hughes propagandised the Republic’s multiracial image, but this bore little resemblance to reality.<sup>99</sup>

Many black volunteers did receive undue attention. Doug Roach, a Communist activist from Massachusetts, described how

When we arrived in the town most of the people had never seen a Negro before. At first, some of the children who crowded around me thought I was one of Franco’s Moors – and were afraid. They wondered why the palms of my hands were not dark like my face. Then one of the kids said in Spanish: ‘He must be a worker, because he has worn all the color from his hands. He’s alright fellows he’s with us’.<sup>100</sup>

The black volunteers interpreted this attention as special treatment. It elevated their self-esteem and restored their sense of manhood. Canute Frankson wrote “Here I’m a man; a human being among human beings”. Tom Page recalled how “sometimes a whole town would turn out when they heard there was a Black man around. Spain was the first place I felt like a free man”.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Hughes, *I wonder as I wander* (Hill and Wang, 1993ed.) 378.

<sup>99</sup> “Organ Grinder’s Swing Heard above Gunfire in Spain,” *Afro-American*, 6/11/1937. Essays, 165.

<sup>100</sup> Ben Davis Jr. *Daily Worker* Sept 1938 “A Small Man from the Cape...” ALBA#189

<sup>101</sup> Canute Frankson letter, 23/6/1938 Madrid ’37 427. Yates, Mississippi to Madrid 164.



However, special treatment was a double-edged sword. The attention was race-based and the line between feting African-Americans and denigrating Moors was a fine one. Walking through Barcelona James Yates felt “embarrassed”. “I was doing something to others that often happened to me in Spain. People would stare at me because they had never seen a Black before. Now I was staring at two Blacks seated at a coffee table”. His behaviour had become conditioned by the racial norms of Spanish society. For all the propaganda about the absence of a colour line in Spain, the volunteers found it impossible to transcend their race.<sup>102</sup>

It proved impossible to escape race-based judgments even within the ALB where race relations were famously progressive. In “Postcard from Spain”, Johnny’s voice is heard again praising the equal treatment of blacks and whites;

Folks over here don’t treat me  
Like white folks used to do...

I done me up with folks  
Who’ll fight for me  
Like I’m fightin’ now for Spain.<sup>103</sup>

Moe Fishman reaffirmed the idea that race was “a non-issue” in ALB. The fact that “your life depended on your black comrade” helped galvanise the volunteers regardless of race.<sup>104</sup>

Yet black volunteers were not just normal members of the brigade. They received disproportionate media attention at the time and in subsequent historical accounts. The Communist press was replete with articles on the “Negroes in Spain”. Salaria Kee, a nurse who was the only black woman in Spain, was the subject of a 14 page biographical booklet. It recorded her journey from a world of racial prejudice in

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid* 144.

<sup>103</sup> Langston Hughes, “Post Card from Spain Addressed to Alabama”, *Volunteer for Liberty* April 1938

<sup>104</sup> Fishman interview

Harlem to Spain. Kee's face became familiar in Spanish and American newspapers and newsreels. On her return to the States she was engaged in lecture tours. There can be little doubt that Kee's identity as a black woman made her a valuable propaganda tool. The fetishisation of the black volunteers contrasted with the silence on the Jewish contribution in Spain. It fed the CPUSA's interracial self-image but contravened the principle of integration.<sup>105</sup>

Special treatment could both elevate and embarrass. The contrasting fortunes of black leaders, Oliver Law and Harry Haywood, reveal that race was crucial in how they were judged by their peers. Law was proclaimed "Hero of the Jarama Front" and his promotion reflected ALB's progressivism. Black volunteer Joe Taylor told a reporter "It's not like the States... here I get some breaks perhaps just because I am colored".<sup>106</sup> Senior commander, Steve Nelson, admitted in a post-war interview that "The idea was that we do something about advancing a black". Law's military experience was "a great asset, even though we may have exaggerated it in our own minds".<sup>107</sup>

Law's promotion did cause some racial resentment. Ray Steele, a machine gunner at Jarama, voiced his anger at being passed over for machine-gun company command. The rebellious Virgil Morris, who was under military punishment told Law he preferred hard labour to being in the battalion. Law replied that it was "not an honour to be in the labour company", to which Morris retorted "at least in the labour company you are treated like [a] white man". Morris Mickenburg later claimed that some had adopted the protest slogan "Restore the whites to equality with the Negro". These racist sentiments were uncommon, but they existed. Even Fishman concedes, "we must have still have retained some of our chauvinism...it was inbred in our culture."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain, Negro Committee to Aid Spain, (New York, 1938)

<sup>106</sup> William Pickens, What I Saw in Spain, *Crisis*, October 1938

<sup>107</sup> *Daily Worker*, Carroll, Odyssey of ALB 135.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* 135-8. Partisan wrangling over the circumstances of Law's death has diverted attention from the racial tensions in ALB. Carroll presents the best summary of the debate.

In contrast to Law's heroic image, Harry Haywood described his experience in Spain as "a personal defeat".<sup>109</sup> Aloof but cowardly, Haywood commanded little respect among the troops and his alcoholism was symptomatic of his inability to cope at the front. He drew particularly stinging criticism from his black comrades. When Langston Hughes suggested to black volunteers that perhaps Haywood was shell-shocked, they said "Shell shocked nothing! If it just hadn't been a *mixed* unit – white boys and all - waiting to obey his orders! Imagine!...A disgrace to the race, that's what he is".<sup>110</sup> Oscar Hunter added that Haywood had been "a real mess for us blacks up there".<sup>111</sup>

These statements reveal how the black volunteers judged themselves in racial terms. Haywood's failure was not any failure but the failure of a black man. The black Lincolns were happy for black leaders to be elevated on the basis of colour, but when those leaders faltered it exposed the tensions between racial pride and integration.

The black men and woman who volunteered in the Spanish Civil War understood that the Negro problem was but a local phase of the world problem.<sup>112</sup> The war appeared to satisfy all the strands of their radical ideology: a commitment to black nationalism, a belief in proletarian universalism and the desire to become fully American. As one volunteer explained: My reasons for coming to Spain were "One, to prove myself that I am capable of risking my life for something I thought was correct, and two, I was testing the Communist Party and its white members; whether they really meant they were our friends."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 470.

<sup>110</sup> Carroll, *Odyssey of ALB* 135.

<sup>111</sup> Oscar Hunter, *This Ain't Ethiopia*, 58.

<sup>112</sup> W E B DuBois, *Colliers Weekly* (1906)

<sup>113</sup> *This Ain't Ethiopia* 90.

The ALB was progressive beyond its time. Its admission and promotion of black soldiers when the US Army was still segregated implied that the Party was a friend to the black community. However, the special treatment of black volunteers jarred with the desire for genuine integration. Black radicals were naïve to believe that black nationalism and proletarian universalism were not mutually exclusive; they were. The presence of Franco's Moorish troops, and the conflicting desires to be singled out and to be considered as just another comrade made it impossible for many of the volunteers to transcend their racial dilemmas. The identity politics of the black volunteers were more problematic than the triumphal histories of the ALB have implied.

## Epilogue

In 1940, two years after the Jewish and black volunteers returned to America, Ernest Hemingway published his masterpiece on the Spanish conflict *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The novel opens with a tense exchange between Pablo, a Spanish guerrilla fighter, and American volunteer, Robert Jordan:

Pablo turned to Robert Jordan. ‘What right have you, a foreigner, to come to me and tell me what I must do?’

Jordan replied ‘I came only for my duty...that I am a foreigner is not my fault I would rather have been born here.’<sup>114</sup>

Hemingway captured the innocence of Jordan’s universal sense of duty and punctured it with Pablo’s question. His desire to have been reborn as a soldier in a People’s Army, is exposed as a tragically utopian vision. Jordan embodied the impossibility of overcoming the disparity between how others see you and how you would wish to be seen. This, I have argued, characterised the Jewish and African-American experience in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>115</sup>

The disappointment of the defeat in Spain, in which some 900 American volunteers were killed, was compounded by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. The

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<sup>114</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, (London: Vintage 1940) 16.

<sup>115</sup> The book received a mixed reception amongst the Lincolns. Milton Wolff argued, “there is no hope, no fight, no will in the book...The Americans there were not of Jordan’s type” Carroll, *Odyssey of ALB* 240.

pact appeared to insult the volunteers' sacrifice in Spain and resulted in an exodus from the CPUSA. Yet despite differences over party politics, the Spanish veterans remained a "band of brothers". "This was a struggle we had gone through together and which bound us by special ties".<sup>116</sup>

Many Lincolns continued the struggle against Hitler in the U.S. Army. Black volunteers were prepared to stomach the regression into segregated units, where they were assigned only the most menial tasks in order to fight. However, the administration was suspicious of the Lincolns' involvement in Spain. They labelled them "premature antifascists" and prevented many from fighting abroad. It was a sign of things to come when the Veterans of Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) were declared "subversive" in 1946.<sup>117</sup>

Throughout the Cold War, the volunteers were the victims of political persecution. Jobs were lost, books censored and many of the brigade's leading lights brought before the House of Un-American Activities Committee.<sup>118</sup> It was a bitter irony that the volunteers who had fought under the banner of Lincoln should be denounced as "un-American". Edwin Rolfe summed it up when he ordered himself to "write as if you lived in an occupied country".<sup>119</sup>

Spain had promised a rebirth for the volunteers as heroic warriors in a just crusade. For the briefest moment, there seemed a chance that the American, radical and ethnic identities of the volunteers would cohere. For the Jews, there was the possibility to shed their ethnic skin and realise a cosmopolitan ideal. For the African-Americans, they could be both proud to be black and stand alongside the white workers of the world.

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<sup>116</sup> Fishman interview.

<sup>117</sup> *Volunteer for Liberty*. Introduction to bound edition of files (New York, 1946) 3.

<sup>118</sup> Jewish volunteer, Alvah Bessie, was one of the famous "Hollywood Ten".

<sup>119</sup> Rolfe, unpublished manuscript in Thurston, *Making Things Happen* 83.

However, the experience of the Spanish Civil War disappointed this promise. The blazing images of the workers of the world united in a Popular Front belied the complexity of Jewish and African-American identity politics. The encounter with thousands of Jewish volunteers, with African troops fighting for Franco, with Comintern's anti-Americanism and the racism of ordinary Spaniards muddied the progressive ideal of the Spanish Republic. The tensions between being American, being radical and being Jewish or black were reawakened by the realities of warfare.

Of the African-Americans who survived the war, some like James Yates became involved with the NAACP and the black civil rights movement, whilst others like Ray Durem abandoned inter-racialist principles and committed themselves to black nationalism. "I discovered that even white radicals were not interested in a radical solution to the Negro Question". Tellingly, many black volunteers neglected the cosmopolitanism of the Left and found a home in more particular black causes.<sup>120</sup>

For Jewish volunteers, the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel heightened their Jewish consciousness and altered their memories of Spain. Many came to recognise a specifically Jewish dimension to their politics which rankled with the rigid ideologues. This was illustrated by the controversy over the Botwin Company's pensions.

Following the Six-Day War (1967), the Communist government in Poland forced Polish Jews out of the country. Among them were those who had fought with the Botwin Company in Spain. A group of Jewish Lincolns called on VALB to campaign for the Polish government to reinstate the Botwins' pensions. They expressed their solidarity both as Jews and as Spanish Civil War veterans. This was explicit in Ed Lending's letter to the *Volunteer*:

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 330.

the battered survivors lost their jobs BECAUSE THEY ARE JEWS...they were tormented into forsaking their homes BECAUSE THEY ARE JEWS..." [He signed off with] "Salud y Shalom".<sup>121</sup>

However, these calls were met with indifference by the VALB committee. Milton Wolff chided the Volunteer's editor "for wasting time on stuff like that". Wolff remained wedded to radical ideology and rejected Jewish politics. The controversy demonstrated the entrapment of the Jewish radicals between their cosmopolitanism and a particular ethnic outlook. The debate was yet another example of the eternal paradox, which Spain inevitably failed to resolve.

The Spanish Civil War was a definitive event, perhaps *the* definitive event, in the lives of Jews and African-Americans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. They put their faith in the Left and the anti-fascist crusade of the Republic to stabilise their turbulent conflict of identities. That Spain failed to meet these expectations, that the war ended in bitter defeat, that Stalin's crimes and McCarthy's anti-communism bastardized their cause, took away nothing from the memory of heady idealism which had fuelled the Popular Front moment of 1936.

Dolores Ibárruri "La Pasionaria", the charismatic Communist politician, captured this in her poignant farewell to the International Brigades. Her closing words resonated with the Lincoln volunteers:

« ¡Mejor morir de pie que vivir de rodillas ! »

It is better to die on your feet, than to live on your knees!<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Salud (Spanish) Shalom (Hebrew). *Volunteer*, Vol 2. No.1 (1979) 8 -10. Saul Wellman "Lincoln Vets Support Botwin Unit" *Jewish Currents* Vol 26. No. 8 (September 1972) 20-22.

<sup>122</sup> Ibarruri, Barcelona 1/11/1938, ALBA#24 Box1



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## **Appendix**

1. Langston Hughes (left) and Edwin Rolfe in Spain.<sup>123</sup>
2. Popular Front patriotism: Cover piece first anniversary Journal of Friends of the ALB.<sup>124</sup>
3. Excerpts from the all-Jewish unit, Botwin Company's, Yiddish-language newspaper the *Botwin*.<sup>125</sup>
4. The idealised socialist body: Republican war poster by “Gallo” (Madrid, 1937).<sup>126</sup>
5. Republican civil war poster depicting inter-racialism of the IBs, attributed to Juan Parilla (Madrid, Ediciones de las Brigadas Internacionales, 1937)<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> ALBA PHOTO #10 Edwin Rolfe

<sup>124</sup> Garcia, Marta Rey, *Stars for Spain: la Guerra civil Española en los Estado Unidos* (Sada, A Coruña Ediciós do Castro, 1997)

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6. Fuera el Invasor! “Out with the invader!”. Moroccan soldier depicted as ape-like invader, Josep Bardasano, (Valencia FETT, Ministerio de Propaganda, 1937) <sup>128</sup>

7. “Los Nacionales”, The Nationalists, Juan Antonio Morales (Ministerio de Propaganda, 1936). Shows a ship of fools loaded with a German capitalist, Italian general, a Catholic bishop and five Moors, two above and three below deck. <sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> PO/3 Marx Memorial Library London