Introduction

On February 6, 1977, the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) hosted a fortieth anniversary banquet honoring women from the United States who participated in the Spanish Civil War. The program, entitled "The Premature Anti-Fascist Women," celebrated individuals who supported Loyalist Spain as nurses, refugee relief workers, war correspondents, and fund-raisers. Among those honored were Helen Freeman, a nurse with the First American Medical Unit who was wounded in a bomb raid, and Ruth Davidow, the only American woman to participate in the historic Ebro Offensive. Evelyn Hutchins, who famously elbowed her way into the boys' club of ambulance drivers in 1936, was recognized for her progressive views on equal rights. Attendees lauded Helen Bryan, former Executive Secretary of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, for her bravery during the McCarthy era when she went to jail because she refused to name names. These were gutsy, independent women.

Held in the California's Bay Area, a hotbed of 1970s feminist activism, the ceremony focused on the individual stories of proactive women. It was part of a move to recognize female volunteers within the largely male-dominated VALB organization. Fredericka Martin was the banquet's primary organizer. Once head of the First American Medical Unit to Spain, she spent the rest of her years as an expatriate in Mexico collecting correspondence and memorabilia from fellow veterans. The VALB specifically commissioned her to use her research for a book about U.S. medical aid to Spain. This project evolved into a broader cause of recognition for female "Brigaders" within the VALB, and organization of a meeting celebrating women volunteers. Timing for the banquet was ideal for raising awareness of the rising tide of feminism in the Bay

Area. The feminist movement latched on to these stories of pioneering, politically active women and used them as examples of proto-feminists.[1]

The anecdotes told at the banquet, however, misrepresent the community of U.S. women volunteers as a whole. The overwhelming majority of women who went to Spain between 1936 and 1939 or who stayed behind to raise awareness for the Spanish cause were not feminists or even feminist precursors. Equal rights for women was rarely a motivating factor for their participation in the Spanish Civil War. 1970s Leftist activism co-opted the legacy of these women volunteers and adapted them to the politics of the decade. The aim of this essay is to reassess why U.S. women went to Spain, the nature of their involvement, and what that involvement illustrates about the role of women in the U.S. Popular Front movement in the 1930s.

U.S. women who actively supported Loyalist Spain and Popular Front politics did not seek change in domestic gender structures. In fact, most women went to Spain through traditionally female occupations, such as nursing and secretarial work. With a few significant exceptions, such as Evelyn Hutchins who was honored at the 1977 banquet, U.S. women in Spain were not out to rock the gender boat. At home leftist female activism was much the same. Concerned women organized fundraising groups structured around feminine causes of children's welfare and hospital aid. These women were not "feminists" because gender equality was not the focus of their activism. Nevertheless, those in Spain and the United States used the community of women to promote their political cause in a way that was distinctly female.

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[1] Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, "40th Anniversary Banquet Honoring The Premature Anti-Fascist Women," pamphlet, 6 February 1977, Fredericka Martin Collection, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, New York University (below abbreviated as ALBA).

What was this political cause? What was at stake in Spain from 1936 to 1939 and why were these U.S. women interested? What did the Popular Front mean for women in the 1930s? Before discussing the role of U.S. women in Spain, it is necessary to provide a background of the Spanish Civil War, U.S. involvement, and leftist politics during this period.

Context

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) started as a complex internal struggle that later became a symbol of the ideological clash between fascism and democracy developing in Europe at the time. In summer of 1936, Francisco Franco led a right-wing military revolt against an unstable Spanish Republic plagued by divergent political factions and regional conflicts. In response, rising fascist powers Hitler and Mussolini provided Franco with arms and human resources. Shy of large-scale military action, Western democracies stepped aside and formed the Non-Intervention Committee in September of 1936. The official position of the United States was "consistent with the major attitudes and policies which preceded it" and focused on insulating the United States from European affairs after World War I. Neutrality Acts put an embargo on arms sales and prohibited American citizens from fighting in Spain.[2]

In response to the United States and Europe's lack of support for Loyalist Spain, the Comintern organized thousands of volunteers into the International Brigades. The U.S. left intervened in Spain. Over 2800 men from nearly every U.S. state violated the

[2] Richard P. Traina, *American Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 13, 26, 38.

Neutrality Acts and volunteered for duty between 1937 and 1939. They formed the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.[3]

U.S. women headed to Spain, as well. The Non-Intervention Agreements did not apply to medical supplies and food, and many women joined the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy to pass into Spain legally. There is a reliable record of at least fifty women from the United States who went to Spain in American Medical Units from January to July of 1937.[4] Over thirty women went as journalists, delegates, or broadcasters. Many had husbands or brothers at the front.[5]

The structure of leftist politics in the United States in 1937 provided for this mobilization. The U.S. had been struggling in a depression for eight years that profoundly affected the politics of the working class. Labor union organization blossomed. Citywide general strikes in 1934 and 1936 demonstrated that leftist labor movements had spread nationwide.[6] A rising population of second-generation immigrants felt solidarity with the international working class, calling themselves "citizens of the world."[7] Therefore, when the tide of fascism began rising in Europe, U.S. leftists joined in the anti-fascism movement. Labor activism, anti-fascism, and international solidarity loosely defined Popular Front politics. Specific interpretations of

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[3] Jefferson Hendricks and Cary Nelson, *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade From the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1, 11.

[4] Fredericka Martin, List of American Medical Bureau Units to Spain, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA, 1-4.

[5] Jim Fyrth, "Foreword," *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Jim Fyrth and Sally Alexander, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 24.

[6] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 32.

[7] Hendricks and Nelson, 29.

the movement varied greatly. A minority were official members of the Communist Party. Many referred to themselves as communists (with a lower case 'c'). Others identified themselves simply as anti-fascists and supporters of international democracy. This broad Popular Front was the backbone of U.S. involvement in Spain. Leftist groups organized campaigns, recruited volunteers and raised funds for the cause.

Since Popular Front politics were essential to U.S. involvement in the Spanish Civil War, it is essential to understand the gender dynamic within the U.S. left in the 1930s. Michael Denning describes this period as "the shift from modern to post-modern gender relations and household formations." The massive unemployment of the Depression led to a "crisis of masculinity" as the proportion of married women workers increased dramatically. This shift "was a consequence of the shifts in the overall occupational structure; it was not that women joined men in occupations, but that sectors of the economy employing women grew." Even so, married women working for wages were often scapegoats for the Depression and blamed for taking jobs away from men.[8]

Within this environment of gender strife, women were still an active part of the labor union movement and Popular Front politics. Denning argues that since the Popular Front was a community-based movement, women were often central community organizers. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) even took an active interest in women workers. However, 1970s-type women's movement politics were not a part of the Popular Front. Women were considered "auxiliaries" in the struggle.[9] This relates directly to the Aid Spain movement of 1936-39. Because much of the organizing for the movement was based on community fundraising and campaigning, women took leading

[8] Denning, 29-31.

[9] Ibid., 32.

roles. Women were also actively recruited to go to Spain as nurses and secretaries, but were considered "auxiliaries" to the fight at the front lines.

U.S. women in the Spanish Civil War held traditionally feminine roles because Popular Front activism in the 1930s emphasized socialism, not feminism. Within this gender structure, however, women used the female community to organize support for the Loyalist cause and promote their own political activity. Evidence for this argument emerges from diaries and letters written by women nurses and social aid workers in Spain, writings by female journalists in Spain, and statistics from the fundraising organizations in the United States. Fredericka Martin's extensive collection of correspondence and memorabilia is an invaluable resource for minutes from fundraising meetings and first-hand accounts of volunteers' experiences. A close reading of these documents demonstrates that although the U.S. women's Aid Spain movement was not feminist, it was powered through a female sense of community.

Although many of these sources are letters or diaries written during the war, several of the most useful documents were written in the years after these women returned. When using memoirs, it is important to recognize the lapse of time and memory from the time the events took place to the time the document was written. However, the memoirs that are used in this essay are useful in that they demonstrate how U.S. women interpreted their own actions during the war. These interpretations, regardless of their truth content, are relevant because they demonstrate that the volunteers did not view themselves as groundbreaking women's rights advocates.

Exploring the different ways in which U.S. women supported the Spanish Republic illuminates the meaning of these documents. Many women were drawn to

Spain through a sense of family, including wives or sisters who followed their male relatives to Spain and the development of familial bonds with Spanish Loyalists. Religion was also a structural outlet for activism that relied on the maternal, feminine instincts of the religious community. The Quakers' American Friends' Service Council organized and supported several U.S. women to provide relief work in Spain. Politics were the driving force for many U.S. volunteers. The female intellectual elite of the Popular Front movement was deeply involved in the Spanish Civil War. Significant figures include politically active writers and war correspondents such as Lillian Hellman, Dorothy Parker, and Martha Gellhorn. Women also took active roles in organizing support for the war in the U.S. through committee building, fundraising, and the press.

The importance of community in all aspects of U.S. women's involvement in the Spanish Civil War is the thread running through each of these groups of volunteers. Although certain individuals were concerned with the rights of women, the female community as a whole was not. Women Brigaders were comfortable in traditionally feminine roles in Spain. Within this gender structure they were still able to take active roles in an international movement.

Family

In 1937, young bride Marion Merriman was stranded in the Soviet Union, alone and devastated. Her husband, University of California at Berkeley economics scholar Robert Hale Merriman, had recently left her for Spain to join the International Brigades. A politically moderate small town girl from Reno, Nevada, Marion tried to understand how her husband could risk his life and her happiness in a foreign war. She wrote in her

diary, "But what do I know other than my feelings? … Bob who made this possible for me, for whom nothing is humdrum, routine or ordinary, who knows the reasons and facts better than I, whom I follow joyfully because I love him and believe in him."[10] Half a decade later, Marion wrote in her memoir about her husband's decision to volunteer: "His logic was overwhelming and my despair was deep."[11] Despite her personal misgivings, Marion rushed join her husband in Spain when she received news that he had been injured. In order to remain near her husband, she became the only official female member of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.

The Merrimans were one of many married American couples in Spain. Another was spunky Evelyn Hutchins, the female ambulance driver, who worked alongside her husband, Carl Rahman.[12] Celia Seborer joined the medical services as a lab technician so that she could accompany her journalist husband, George Marrion, to Spain. She said she went "not as a volunteer but to be with [her] husband."[13] Many of these wives shared their husbands' political fervor. Edna Romer wrote home to friends that she and her Lincoln Brigader husband were the "revolutionary Romers."[14] Eslanda Goode Robeson, wife of Paul Robeson, Jr., accompanied her husband while he toured and entertained the

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[10] Marion Merriman, diary, 18 April 1937, from Warren Lerude and Marion Merriman, *American Commander in Spain: Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 120.

[11] Ibid., 71.

[12] Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, Press Release, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[13] Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, "40th Anniversary Banquet Honoring The Premature Anti-Fascist Women," 7.

[14] Edna Romer, Spain to [Jim and Ellen], 8 March 193?, ALBA.

Abraham Lincoln Battalion, writing with great pride about black soldiers she met.[15] Whether they shared their husbands' political ideology or not, the familial bond of marriage motivated these women to volunteer in Spain.

Isolated in a foreign country and alienated by war, U.S. women in Spain regularly sought out the comfort of a family-type environment. "Family" for U.S. women volunteers meant the tie between husband and wife in Spain, the extension of a maternal sympathy for the thousands of orphaned Spanish children, and the pseudo-familial relationships that developed in hospitals among the nurses themselves and with the Spanish people. Religious kinship was also a way that women created a sense of community in Spain. Gravitation towards traditional female roles within family-like groups demonstrates the willingness of these women to accept established gender definitions.

Lydia Ellicott Morris, a Quaker relief worker, wrote home about the importance of companionship while volunteering. Her letter illustrates the tendency of U.S. women to seek spousal relationships in Spain: "Now the truth is that fear is a serious thing alone in this work, and two people are much better off for this reason. I was surprised to find how idleness, loneliness, and nothing to read nor people who spoke one's language, gave me moments of cold feet."[16] Marriage was a comfort from cold and lonely days in dank, unheated Spanish buildings that typified the volunteer's experience. Like Morris, Edna Romer eased the discomforts of volunteering by relying on her personal relationships.

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[15] Eslanda Goode Robeson, diary extract, 31 January 1938, from Alvah Bessie, ed., *The Heart of Spain* quoted in Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991) 304-305.

[16] Lydia Ellicott Morris, Paris, to [Mahlon], 22 October 1936, the American Friends' Service Council, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 177.

She nursed with the American Medical Bureau while her husband went to the front, and kept as busy as possible to withstand the cold while she waited "impatiently for the hero's return."[17] Companionship with a husband was necessary for these wives to withstand the hardships associated with volunteering.

It is difficult to determine whether it was more important for these wives to fight for a cause or to stay with their spouse. Marion Merriman, for example, wrote that she learned to hate the fascists when she witnessed a bomb raid in Madrid: "For me, Madrid was a turning point. I no longer felt I was there simply as Bob's wife. That I was, of course, and that I would remain. Suddenly, however, I also felt a very personal need to help. The fight against fascism became my fight too."[18] This statement, however, was written fifty years after her time in Spain, and the true extent of her political turnaround is difficult to gauge. Also, her motivations for staying in Spain were clear when her husband asked her to return to the United States: "I told Bob I wanted to remain with him, no matter what."[19] Despite her new political leanings, Merriman still prioritized her relationship with her husband.

Carol Miller, a nurse under Frederick Martin, took personal family interests to an extreme. Her sole purpose in Spain was to search for her divorced husband. She wanted "to be sure she didn't love him any more, before marrying someone else…she didn't care a fig what side in the war she nursed on as long as she got her expenses paid for her personal search."[20] Although Miller is an extreme example, she illustrates a common

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[17] Edna Romer, Spain, to [Dear Comrades], 18 November 1937, ALBA.

[18] Lerude and Merriman, 141.

[19] Ibid., 182.

[20] Fredericka Martin, "Nurses," 27 July 1968, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

conflict between personal, marital interests and the political or moral cause for which the women volunteered.

One result of this conflict was the frequency of marriages between fellow volunteers. Young, lonely nurses, doctors, soldiers and activists sought and found companionship in one another while staying true their individual ideals of service that drove them to volunteer. Three American Medical Bureau nurses married doctors while in Spain, and four married soldiers from the Battalion.[21] War correspondent Martha Gellhorn met Ernest Hemingway on the journey to Spain and became his third wife while there.[22] In a letter to nurse Toby Jensky, fellow nurse "Till" wrote about her engagement to a man she met in Spain.[23]

Women welcomed marriage and male company to establish normalcy amidst the chaos of the war. For example, Ray Harris, a young nurse with the American Medical Bureau, had a fling with George Hirst, an English soldier with the International Brigades. She remembered that they "bedded down in the linen room for a nite."[24] Like Harris, other volunteers used physical and emotional relationships with men to transform wartime settings like the hospital linen closet into touchstones of regularity and normalcy associated with peacetime.

For the majority of U.S. women in Spain, who remained unattached, 1970s-type female self-definition and independence was not their motivation. Nurse Lini de Vries,

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[21] Fredericka Martin, "AMB Personnel Who Married in Spain," Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[22] Fyrth and Alexander, 339.

[23] Till, London, Great Britain, to [Toby Jensky], 23 April 1938, Anne Taft Muldavin Collection, ALBA, 1.

[24] Ray Harris, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 135.

for example, left behind a daughter in the U.S. to go to Spain, but did not view her actions as freeing her from burdensome family obligations. Instead, she felt a moral conflict between her feminine duties at home and her work in Spain. "I was torn between my feeling of guilt and the love I had for service."[25]

In an attempt to reconcile this conflict, U.S. women volunteers formed pseudo-familial ties to orphaned Spanish children. In particular, female members of the American Friends Service Committee were active in providing relief work for babies and children. Florence Conrad, a member of the AFSC, served in Spain and France from 1938-1939 and wrote this home about a sick baby she had seen at a hospital: "No bomb holes, or refugees, or women's tears and sob stories can move me so much as that struggling little life, so helpless against external diabolical forces."[26] When Esther Farquhar took over relief work in the village of Murcia, she immediately set a goal for the project: enough milk for all babies under one year old.[27] A children's hospital was set up in nearby Polop.[28] Quaker women latched on to the cause of orphaned and debilitated children.

They were not alone. Dr. Edith Summerskill, a British pediatrician and political figure, toured the U.S. in 1939 to raise money and awareness for the establishment of

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[25] Lini de Vries Thompson, "Crying Would Have to Come Later," from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 145.

[26] Florence Conrad, letter, 27 September 1938, the American Friends' Service Council, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 210-211.

[27] Esther Farquhar, Murcia, Spain to [The American Friends' Service Council], 1 June 1937, the American Friends' Service Council, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 204-205.

[28] Martha Rupel, Murcia, Spain to [My Dear Friends], 8 January 1939, the American Friends' Service Council, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 217-219.

"Children's Cities" in Spain. These housing, recreational, and educational facilities would support 1,000 "homeless child-refugees and war orphans" each. Women's groups in the U.S. were thrilled with an opportunity to support the Spanish cause within the traditionally feminine sphere of the family. Women from Y.W.C.A., Friends General Conference, and the Methodist Federation for Social Service sponsored the tour.[29] Prominent Leftist intellectual Dorothy Parker chaired the "Spanish Children's Milk Fund," which sponsored swishy Hollywood fundraisers attended almost exclusively by women.[30]

Concentrating relief services on children was an effective means of wooing public opinion in Spain and back at home. Countless pamphlets touted Dr. Summerskill's tour and urged Americans to help Spanish orphans by sending money or goods. Emily Parker, a Quaker aid worker, claimed she moved a border guard to tears when she stated that her purpose in Spain was "to help the children."[31] The appeal of children's aid to the public was firmly attached to the value of the family. Women who nurtured these children fulfilled moral and social obligations. They helped a broken Spain through traditionally feminine occupations and were comfortable in this role.

Sisterhood between Spanish women and U.S. nurses and aid workers was the third means of establishing familial relationships for women Brigaders. *The Volunteer*, the magazine for the U.S. Aid Spain movement, published Celia Seborer's thoughts on

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[29] Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, "From the Women of Great Britain to the Women of America!" pamphlet, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[30] Spanish Children's Milk Fund, Press Release, 15 November 193?, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[31] Emily Parker, letter, February 1938, the American Friends' Service Committee, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 207.

the nurses' relationship with Spanish women. She wrote, "Probably the most vital parts of our work and one that until now we have underestimated and neglected is our work with the Spanish girls and women here in the hospital."[32] Rose Freed, another nurse, was moved by the plight of the Spanish women around her. She wrote home, "At times I feel moved to tears… What right had I to be frightened, I who have just tasted what they have long lived through?"[33] U.S. hospitals were oversized homes filled with international families and taken care of by U.S. women. They established themselves as teachers, confidantes, supervisors, and sisters for the Spanish women and international soldiers who came under their care. This pseudo-familial relationship and the establishment of schools allowed for female activism without challenging gender expectations.

U.S. women in Spain took on the education of the women around them with relish. Ruth Waller, a nurse with the American Medical Bureau, issued a Madrid Radio Broadcast on January 10, 1938 on establishing a nursing school for Spanish women and emphasized the importance of conquering illiteracy.[34] Celia Seborer was also interested in the "political education" of the Spanish women she encountered.[35] Education for Spanish women by U.S. volunteers was a natural role to play because teaching was a feminine occupation.

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[32] Celia Seborer, Murcia, Spain, 11 July 1937, from *The Volunteer*, Vol. VII No. 3, 1935, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 161.

[33] Rose Freed, Tarancon, Spain, to [Lou], 20 March 1937, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 127-129.

[34] Ruth Waller, Madrid Radio Broadcast, 10 January 1938, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 163.

[35] Seborer, letter, 11 July 1937.

There were strong bonds between the Americans and their "suffering Spanish sisters."[36] Wives of army, navy and air force officers formed a Women's Aid Commission aid Spanish women who worked in factories by providing childcare and food for children whose mothers were absent at work.[37] Mildred Rackley, who came to Spain as a secretary with the first American Hospital Unit and later became the director of the Huete hospital, described one Spanish woman who joined their community. "Little Josefina was a refugee from Cordoba. She had spent most of her life working in the fields. She was such a little thing we almost refused her work, but she told us she was very strong from her field work."[38] Josefina, like many other refugee women, found work in a Medical Bureau Hospital. Spanish and American nurses struggled through the language barrier and embraced one another as sisters.

Religion was also a way of creating using feminine kinship values to justify participation in the war. Many U.S. women volunteers in Spain were religious. One of these was Salaria Kee, one of two African American nurses in the American Medical Bureau. She went to Spain out of a sense of moral and religious obligation. Reflecting on her time in Spain she wrote, "I said I'm not just going to sit down and let this happen. I'm going out to help, even if it is my life! But I'm helping. This is my world, too! And I'm not going to sit down and just let people do what they want to do, when it's wrong.

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[36] Mrs. Samuel McCrea Caveret, Member National Board Y.W.C.A., from Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, "From the Women of Great Britain to the Women of America!" pamphlet, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[37] Monica Milward, "Women's Aid Commission," from diary, 16-17, Fredericka Martine Collection, ALBA.

[38] Mildred Rackley, *It Isn't Romantic, But…*, unpublished manuscript, 1938?, Mildred Rackley Simon and Brandeis University, Special Collections, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 136-138.

And I'm a nurse! Look at all those soldiers and all the people being hurt—look at all the people even in Spain, young children, being bombed. Not being taken care of, and all that. Women, men, everybody. And I was doing Christ's duty." Kee's religion justified and fueled her work.[39] In an interview years after the war she described her motivation: "I guess I really wanted to go…because I was a Catholic…. I assumed there would be nuns helping the poor in the Spanish Civil War, on the side of those who were defending democracy."[40] For Kee, religion provided a context for her political activism.

Although today, Popular Front politics, socialism, and communist activism have secular connotations, the importance of organized religious groups and beliefs in the Aid Spain movement, particularly among U.S. women, cannot be ignored. Bishop Francis McConnell led the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy until January of 1938.[41] Many of the officers of the Executive and General Committee of the American Friends of Spanish Democracy were bishops or rabbis.[42] Religious communities were comfortable and socially acceptable arenas for female activism.

The most significant religious group for U.S. women in Spain was the American Friends' Service Council (AFSC). Formed after its British equivalent, the Quaker members of the Council provided relief aid for displaced Spanish women and children. Lydia Ellicott Morris was the first Friend to travel to Spain to look into the possibilities

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[39] Salaria Kee, "Doing Christ's Duty," from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 151.

[40] Salaria Kee O'Reilly, from John Gerassi, *The Premature Antifascists: North American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939 An Oral History* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986), 43.

[41] Fredericka Martin, "AMB-NAC Merger, January 1938," unpublished papers, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[42] American Friends of Spanish Democracy, brochure, 193?, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

for relief work in 1936.[43] She wrote in a letter on her way home from Spain, "The fact that Quakers are the only people standing for God who are wanted, urged, and invited to come in there now is just a very heavy responsibility."[44] Murcia became the AFSC's home base and several other U.S. Quaker women followed Morris. Esther Farquhar, a social service worker in Cleveland, Ohio, set up the plan to distribute milk to all the babies in Murcia in 1937.[45]

The link between social service organizations and religious groups had already been established when U.S. women began volunteering in Spain. Groups like the Salvation Army and the Methodist Federation for Social Service were outlets for U.S. women to work for social welfare. These female religious organizations sponsored speaking tours and fundraisers for the Aid Spain effort.[46] The AFSC was in the tradition of Quaker value for community and social service. Relief work in Spain was a natural transition, particularly when backed by an extensive network of fundraising and supply support by churches, societies and clubs back home in the United States.

In particular, women went to Spain through religious groups or with religion in mind because female social activism within the sphere of religion fit perfectly within the guidelines of gender role expectations. Salaria Kee, for example, evoked Christ in the above passage to support her work in Spain. Religious groups were active and successful fundraisers for nurses and welfare workers. These women Brigaders were comfortable within the sphere of religion because they were able to be social and political activists

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[43] Fyrth and Alexander, 177.

[44] Morris, 178.
[45] Ibid., 204-205.

[46] Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, "40th Anniversary Banquet Honoring The Premature Anti-Fascist Women," pamphlet, 6 February 1977, 4.

without compromising their femininity. The women of the Aid Spain movement were not feminists, but socially and politically aware women who did not challenge traditional gender roles and enthusiastically participated in religious groups.

Quaker participation is significant because it was a staunchly apolitical group that often did not take sides in the war. Morris wrote, "As thee knows it was just a sort of Quaker impulse that took me there, in spite of having no letter from the Embassy in Paris. They wished to give such letters only to those claiming membership in some anti-fascist club or association, and I think Friends are not in the least a partisan group, but believe in serving the government they live under."[47] The Friends focused on basic human services and on the plight of the Spanish children. "The school people say, 'There is no political party for children, they are just children,' and they mean to see that they are kept out of parties and politics…. I told them frankly we were of neither party, but wanted to keep safe these children if we could."[48] Because the AFSC was officially neutral, the U.S. government did not consider them in violation of the Non-Intervention policy. Therefore, the AFSC women volunteers enjoyed greater credibility among the general population back home.

As a result, female activists avoided condemnation as radicals. The Friends provided a community through which Ruth Cope, Lydia Ellicott Morris, Martha Rupel and Florence Conrad were able to provide welfare assistance to Spain. Politically centrist Americans did not readily condemn the AFSC for Republican Spain because they

[47] Morris, 177.

[48] Ibid., 179.

continued to do jobs that fit the profile of well-meaning religious women. Religious organizations were kinship communities that emphasized traditional femininity.

Such familial relationships illustrate how U.S. women viewed their role in the war. An overwhelming majority of these women were nurses, secretaries, wives, or relief workers. In each of these traditionally feminine capacities, marriage, preoccupation with child welfare, religion, and the sisterly bonds formed with Spanish women were important motivations for the volunteers to remain in Spain despite the physical and emotional discomfort of their work. The essence of these values was the feminine connection and duty for the family. Most volunteers, regardless of their political background, accepted and celebrated this traditional value structure. The political emphasis of the Aid Spain cause was anti-fascism, not women's liberation. One woman wrote, "I am still content to leave the mechanism of war to those who enjoy the art,"[49] perfectly content to watch from the sidelines and nurse the wounded.

Politics

On April 23, 1937, Commander of the Lincoln Brigade Robert Hale Merriman went to Madrid on official business. His wife, Marion, accompanied him. While in Madrid, this small-town girl visited with the some of the most important intellectual minds of the American Left, including Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Josephine Herbst, and Martha Gellhorn.[50] Marion had the unique opportunity of interacting with

[49] Ruth Cope, Murcia, Spain, to [Family], 13 November 1938, the American Friends' Service Council, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 177.

[50] Lerude and Merriman, 128-130.

these major literary figures; it was an experience she would never have had if she had not volunteered in Spain.

Spain in the late 1930s was the meeting place of two sections of the U.S. political left: the intellectual elite and the working class. Politically aware women nurses and aid workers were a part of a broader political caste. However, Spain was also the birthplace of a Popular Front female intellectual and political elite. Renowned war correspondents Martha Gellhorn and Josephine Herbst got their start in Spain.[51] Playwright Lillian Hellman and writer Dorothy Parker used their experiences in Spain to inspire Aid Spain activism within the arts community in the United States.[52]

For both these sections of the political left, anti-fascism and labor organization was the focus for their activism. U.S. women politically involved themselves in the Aid Spain movement because they identified with the left, not because they were attempting to redefine gender roles. Although Martha Gellhorn and Josephine Herbst did break into the traditionally male occupation of war journalism in Spain, this was not their conscious goal. Socialism and anti-fascism drove the female intellectual elite to Spain, not feminism.

To examine the politics of U.S. women in the Aid Spain movement, it is necessary to consider the political beliefs of the general population of women volunteers in Spain and those of specific figures like Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker. The actions and occupations of these women before and after the war illustrate their political

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[51] Fyrth and Alexander, 339; Tom Longden, "Famous Iowans," *The Des Moines Register*; available from http://desmoinesregister.com/extras/iowans/herbst.html; Internet; accessed 31 December 2003.

[52] Lillian Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969); Dorothy Parker, radio broadcast, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 294-5.

focus. For both the intellectual elite and the broader segment of female volunteers, feminist activism was never central to their involvement in the Aid Spain movement. This discussion illuminates the nature of the 1930s Popular Front intellectual community and how it defined the politics of its women.

The political leanings of the general population of women aid workers in Spain in the 1930s can be determined from their occupations before and after the war. Many of these women were active in the labor union movement. Before going to Spain, Evelyn Hutchins organized longshoremen on the West Coast. After the war, she supported office and shop worker unions and fought to save Spanish trade unionists in Franco's prisons. Mildred Rackley, a secretary and interpreter with the first American Hospital Unit, organized labor in California shipyards during World War II. Many volunteers continued relief campaign work after the war. For example, Ray Harris, the longest-serving U.S. nurse in Spain, became a nurse in a Mexican migrant worker camp in California. After living in Mexico, head nurse Fredericka Martin received a doctorate from the University of Alaska for her work on environmental conservation and Aleut Eskimo native rights. Nurse Emily Parker was involved in relief work during the Depression in the coalfields of West Virginia and Kentucky and Irene Goldin spent World War II in France where she worked with refugee children and joined La Resistance. Mildred Rackley edited *Fight*, a publication of the League Against War and Fascism.[53] These former nurses, secretaries, and ambulance drivers spent their entire lives actively pursuing the aims of their leftist politics: economic and medical aid for the lower classes, union organization, and

[53] Fyrth and Alexander, 131, 134, 136, 155, 207.

resistance to fascism in Europe. This outpouring of female activism was leftist, but not feminist.

These political values of labor union support, socialist relief work, and anti-fascism resonate in the letters and memoirs of these women. Their voices demonstrate how integral anti-fascist politics were to many of the volunteers. In some cases, the women were more politically motivated than their male counterparts. Dorothy Fontaine, a nurse, wrote in a letter to Fredericka Martin that the political fervor of the nurses in Spain was significantly greater than that of the doctors. She reasoned that this was "because those of us who went, at least the female personnel, were really convinced that we were helping to stop a world war. I think, on the whole, the nurses represented the best of the Medical Personnel. They didn't go to learn their trade as many of the young doctors did. They already knew it."[54] Within the American Medical Bureau, nurses were sometimes older and more experienced than their male counterparts, like Fredericka Martin and Mildred Rackley. The nurses' were not in Spain because they had no other career options; not everyone was allowed to go who volunteered.[55] Their motivations were more ideological.

Some of the women nursed because it was their only means of supporting their political cause. Edna Romer maintained her connection to her political organization while she was in Spain. She wrote to her "Dear Comrades" on behalf of herself and her husband requesting updates on election returns and home front politics. "What's

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[54] Dorothy Fontaine Mardfin, to [Fredericka Martin, Mexico], 4 January 1971, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[55] Sally Alexander, "Introduction," *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 19.

happening to [the Socialist Party] nationally… Are we taking any stand on United Front?" She described a dinner the nurses had with a congressman and expressed excitement about their "sincere and revolutionary" speeches. She wrote, "I was terribly pleased. I hope they'll do something to change the 'so called' Neutrality Act." While her husband fought at the front, Edna Romer conducted an active political correspondence. Political parties back home supported their members who nursed in Spain and provided them with supplies. [56]

Hospitals themselves became test environments for socialist values. When Lini de Vries received the task of organizing the Castillejo hospital so it could handle 300 convalescent patients, up from a capacity of fifty, she relied on her knowledge of cooperative labor. She convinced the soldiers to volunteer for chores and succeeded in creating an efficient, communal environment. She wrote, "We were on the road toward progress in human relations right here at Castillejo."[57] Nurses put their political theories of socialism and labor organization to practical application in the hospitals.

Wives and relative of Lincoln Brigade soldiers were politically active on the home front. Letters written home by the soldiers encouraged their wives to work against the Neutrality Act. Canute Frankson bluntly wrote to his wife, "It is your duty in your social clubs and church groups to tell the people of our contribution to the cause of human liberation here in Spain."[58] William Sennett pushed his wife to take a more active

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[56] Edna Romer, Spain, to [Dear Comrades], 18 November 1937, ALBA.

[57] Lini de Vries, "Crying Would Have to Come Later," in *Up from the Cellar*, ed. Mary Lee Thompson (Minneapolis: Vanilla Press, 1979) 139-145.

[58] Canute Frankson, Spain, to [My dear], July 1937, from Jefferson Hendricks and Cary Nelson, *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade From the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 62.

role in her union. He wrote home to her from the front, "Keep in regular touch with the District and try to learn from other branches—act a lot on your own and develop yourself politically. Gee Gus, if you applied yourself I know that in a short time you could be a section organizer."[59] Archie Brown suggested to his "Darling": "Maybe you could also help get things organized in the women's section of the warehousemen. And maybe you could get known among those gals. What do you think sugar?" Reading beyond the patronizing tone of these letters, it is clear that women were taking active roles in unions and the Aid Spain movement in the United States. Whether the motivation was the advice of their husbands or their own political initiative, women's social clubs and female union divisions were outlets for political activism. This Popular Front activism focused on union and socialist causes, not on changing traditional gender structures.

Transnational identity groups also provided political impetus for involvement in Spain. Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia ignited the African-American community. Participating in the Spanish Civil War was a way to stand up to this affront. Several African-American men volunteered to serve in the Lincoln Brigade to fight fascism.[60] In the propaganda brochure "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain," Salaria Kee wrote, "Negro men have given up their lives [in Spain] as courageously as any heroes of any age. Surely Negro people will just as willingly give of their means to relieve the suffering of a people attacked by the enemy of all racial minorities—fascism—and its most aggressive exponents—Italy and Germany."[61] Eslanda Robeson, a black rights

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[59] William Sennett, Spain, to [his wife], March 1937, Ibid., 67-68.

[60] Canute Frankson, Spain, to [My dear], July 1937.

[61] Salaria Kee, "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain," (Negro Committee to Aid Spain, 1938), from Danny Duncan Collum, editor; Victor A. Berch, chief researcher, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: "This ain't Ethiopia, but it'll do"* (New York: G.K. hall & Co., 1992).

activist in the United States and wife of musician Paul Robeson, traveled to Spain and supported the anti-fascist troops.[62]

This international sense of identity motivated many Jewish Americans as well. Fascism had swept across Germany and Italy and Mussolini and Hitler were beginning to look outside their borders. Mussolini had recently invaded Ethiopia. Nazi anti-Semitism was gaining power. Although the Holocaust had not yet begun, Jewish Americans were taking notice of increasingly harsh treatment of Jews in Europe. When Hitler backed Franco in Spain, hundreds of Jewish American men enlisted in the International Brigades. Wilfred Mendelson wrote home in June 1938: "The real international language here is Yiddish…And 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."[63]

Jewish American women were equally moved. Rose Freed left her job as a lab technician at Greenpoint Hospital in Brooklyn at age 26 to serve in the first American Hospital Unit to Spain.[64] At least twelve American nurses were Jewish.[65] Participation in the war was a concrete way to take action against the rising tide of anti-Semitic fascism.

The women of the 1930s intellectual elite were also proactive and politically charged, but not for the cause of women's rights. Playwright Lillian Hellman

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[62] Fyrth and Alexander, 304.

[63] Wilfred Mendelson, Spain to [Folks], June 1938, from Jefferson Hendricks and Cary Nelson, *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade From the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 40.

[64] Hendricks and Nelson, 9.

[65] Martin, List of American Medical Bureau Units.

demonstrates this in her 1969 memoir, *An Unfinished Woman*. She describes her friendships with Hemingway, Dorothy Parker and John Dos Passos and remembers the time she spent in Spain during the war. In the first few pages of the book, she vocalizes the blasé attitude about women's rights that she shared with her peers. She writes, "By the time I grew up the fight for the emancipation of women, their rights under the law, in the office, in bed, was stale stuff. My generation didn't think much about the place or the problems of women."[66] Hellman's reputation for stretching the truth does not compromise these thoughts on her politics. Although her contemporaries were products of the 1920s, typified by the gender blending flappers, this sensibility was not as prevalent in the 1930s. Women's rights concerns took a backseat to the Depression and rising conflict in Europe.

While Hellman's generation did not think about the "place or the problems of women," they did think about fascism and what was happening in Spain. During a visit to London on her way home from Madrid, Hellman stormed out of a dinner party in "rampage anger" when the guests supported the Non-Intervention Act. Hellman describes this time in London as the "root-time of my turn toward the radical movements of the late thirties," a move many intellectuals had already made by that time. Hellman, like her peers, had "strong convictions about Fascism-Nazism" and became an avid scholar of socialist theory when she returned to the United States. In her memoir she writes about this period, "I put aside most other books for Marx and Engels, Lenin, Saint-Simon, Hegel, and Feuerbach."[67] Hellman's interest in socialism and Communism was

[66] Hellman, 35.

[67] Ibid., 81, 108, 118.

part of a trend for young intellectual minds in the 1930s. Popular Front politics were not just about organized labor and social welfare, but also about the theory and the thinking behind those movements.

Another woman who placed more emphasis on her leftist political beliefs than her social position as a woman was Dorothy Parker. "Dotty" was a poet, writer, and icon of the New York literary scene in the 1920s and 1930s. She was part of the same social circle as Lillian Hellman, Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passos. An active fundraiser and organizer for the Aid Spain movement, Parker chaired the Women's Committee of the American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy and founded the Anti-Nazi League in Hollywood, efforts that led to her blacklisting during the McCarthy era.[68] She also chaired the Spanish Children's Milk Fund.[69] Popular Front politics, in particular the anti-fascist movement for Loyalist Spain, fueled her public activism.

Although Parker was progressive in the sense that she comfortably went head-to-head with the male intellects of her time, equal rights for women was not her goal. Her position was simply a consequence of an active interest in leftist politics. In a radio broadcast from Spain that was published in the *Volunteer for Freedom*, Parker said, "It makes you sick to think of it. That these people who pulled themselves up from centuries of oppression and exploitation cannot go on to a decent living, to peace and progress and civilization, without the murder of their children and the blocking of their way because two men—two men—want more power. It is incredible, it is fantastic, it is absolutely

[68] Fyrth and Alexander, 294.

[69] Spanish Children's Milk Fund, press release, 15 November 193?, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

beyond all belief…except that it is true."[70] Here Parker illuminates the fear that plagued women of the U.S. Popular Front: that Hitler and Mussolini would succeed in transforming Europe through fascism.

This fear eclipsed any hint of a women's movement that might have developed among the intellectual elite during the late 1930s. War correspondent Josephine Herbst supported the women's movement later in the century, but during the Spanish Civil War years she was otherwise occupied. In 1960 she reflected on her motivations for going to Spain in an essay for *The Noble Savage*. She went to Spain "*Because*…Why do you write a book? Why do you fall in love? *Because*. It is the one conclusive answer that comes from the bottom of the well. Later you may dress it up with reasons; some of them may very well apply. But *because* is the soundest answer you can give to an imperative. I didn't even want to go to Spain. I had to. *Because*."[71] This inexplicable drive to support Loyalist Spain—through reporting, nursing, or fundraising—took precedence over any potential women's rights activism. Lillian Hellman, Dorothy Parker, Martha Gellhorn, and Josephine Herbst, the politically aware and active women who could have fostered an early feminism, were more concerned with Popular Front politics.

Popular Front politics grew out of the labor union and socialist movements in the 1930s and fostered communities of politically active women. Some of these women went to Spain and nursed or reported, others stayed home and supported Loyalist Spain

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[70] Dorothy Parker, "No Axe to Grind," *Volunteer for Freedom*, 15 November 1937, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 294-296.

[71] Josephine Herbst, "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain," The Noble Savage I, March 1960, from Warren Lerude and Marion Merriman, *American Commander in Spain: Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 77.

indirectly. The women of the intellectual and elite enthusiastically supported the Aid Spain cause. For this generation of leftist, political women, anti-fascism and union organization eclipsed the cause of women's rights. If there had not been a Depression, an emerging labor movement, and the rising threat of Hitler and Mussolini in Europe, leftist American women may have adopted feminism and an active movement for a shift in gender roles. This, however, was not the case.

Publicity

Salaria Kee, the African-American nurse who married an International Brigade soldier, achieved minor celebrity on her return to the United States. In June 1938, Salaria was a busy lady. On a trip to Chicago, she breakfasted with the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and then moved on to a reception at the Provident Hospital organized by the visiting Nurses Association. Next, she jet set to Philadelphia where she was received by women from the Democratic Clubs, two public school principals, nurses from the Mercy Hospital, and several church figures. From Philadelphia, she stopped in Harlem where she spoke at a meeting of the Progressive Women's Club, an African-American organization.[72]

Sending medical supplies, nurses, ambulance drivers, and relief workers to Spain required money. Whereas the Comintern and the Spanish Republic picked up the tab for International Brigade soldiers' travel and living expenses, the American Medical Bureau (AMB) was on its own.[73] The AMB and similar Aid Spain organizations relied on

[72] Pearl W. Levenstein for Evelyn Ahrend, Coordinating Secretary of the Campaign and Organization Departments, memo to [Mrs. Clifford Stickney], 11 June 1938, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[73] Traina, 40.

private funding to continue functioning; they were under constant pressure to increase political and financial support. For every U.S. nurse in Spain there were seven committee heads in the 1937 Enrollment Campaign for Medical Aid to Spain. Each of these committee members worked to organize fundraisers and garner political support for the cause.[74]

Kee's whirlwind speaking tour was one of many organized by the AMB and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (NAC) to raise funds and awareness. U.S. nurses were ideal representatives of the Aid Spain movement and the perfect people to request money and support for the cause. They had seen the horrors of the war first-hand, cared for the wounded, and taken action against fascism. The committee heads of the AMB and the NAC needed these sympathetic figures to rake in the donations.

The Aid Spain fundraising movement was dependent on publicity for its survival. From September 26 to November 12, 1937, attendance and donations at meetings of the NAC were disappointing in some cities. Leland Stowe, an NAC official attributed this to the fact that "the biggest handicap of the NAC is that moderates have sheered away from it, scared by all the Marxist bugaboo, and are doing nothing at all."[75] Broader support for the cause would place more pressure on the U.S. government and draw more donations. The American Friends of Spanish Democracy, an organization with ten percent female participation, expressed its need for a large audience in a brochure. Its purpose was to

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[74] Fredericka Martin, "List of American Medical Bureau Units to Spain," Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA; American Medical Bureau, "1937 Enrollment Campaign for Medical Aid to Spain" (American Friends of Spanish Democracy: 1937), Frederick Martin Collection, ALBA.

[75] Leland Stowe, "Speeches for the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy," 1937, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

"arouse the widest possible understanding of the issues in Spain and to counteract false propaganda" in order that the U.S. government would "prevent the shipment of arms and war supplies to rebels against the legitimate government [of Spain]."[76]

U.S. women in Spain became central figures in the U.S. press because they appealed to a broad audience. Unlike the Lincoln Brigade soldiers, U.S. women were healing, not fighting, an easier concept to grasp in the non-interventionist United States. Furthermore, the large philanthropic female community in Hollywood, church groups, and child welfare organizations related to nurses, Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, and relief workers simply because they were women.[77]

The AMB and NAC used this to their advantage. The Spanish Press Bureau played an important role in publicizing U.S. women volunteers. The use of radio broadcasts, speaking tours, and famous figures increased legitimacy for the cause. Women Brigaders—nurses, war correspondents, secretaries, ambulance drivers, and relief workers—were portrayed as mainstream American women who could not in good conscience ignore the war in Spain. They were not icons of proactive women. However, an analysis of the organization of Aid Spain publicity shows that women largely powered this movement. The eighty or so U.S. women who went to Spain relied on a broad network of women's organizations in the United States.[78] Popular Front fundraising was largely a women's movement.

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[76] American Friends of Spanish Democracy, brochure, 193?, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[77] Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, "40th Anniversary Banquet Honoring The Premature Anti-Fascist Women," pamphlet, 6 February 1977.

[78] Ibid.; Fredericka Martin, List of American Medical Bureau Units to Spain, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA, 1-4; Jim Fyrth, "Foreword," *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Jim Fyrth and Sally Alexander, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 24.

Republican Spain's Press Bureau was more a means of propaganda than a news service. Gamel Woolsey, an American woman who lived in Malaga during the 1930s wrote that she and her husband only listened to the radio broadcasts from the insurgent government in Seville because it "was far more accurate than news from the government side, having indeed some relation to fact, which government news never did, being simply a recital of triumphs and victories, almost all entirely imaginary."[79] The Spanish Press Bureau used its ability to reach a broad audience to instill legitimacy in its troubled government. It also was a means of encouraging Western democracies to end non-intervention.

The Press Bureau courted prominent U.S. women to publicize the Republic's cause. Press Bureau members welcomed and entertained the first American Hospital Unit in Barcelona.[80] Journalist Milly Bennett joined the Spanish Press Bureau and gathered material for Hemingway at the front lines.[81] At a dinner party in Paris in 1937, Otto Simon, the Communist press chief for the government convinced Lillian Hellman to travel to Spain.[82] The Press Bureau organized an itinerary for Hellman that included meeting La Pasionaria, the legendary woman who symbolized the fight for Republican Spain, visiting the Press Chief, and going to the front (an offer Hellman declined).[83] After a month in Spain, Hellman felt she had done all she could to publicize the cause.

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[79] Gamel Woolsey, *Malaga Burning: An American Woman's Eyewitness Account of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Pythia Press, 1998), 51.

[80] Fredericka Martin, "Dates of AMB First Group," Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[81] Lerude and Merriman, 79, 167.

[82] Hellman, 81.

[83] Lillian Hellman, diary entry, Valencia, 17 and 28 October 1937, from *An Unfinished Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 87, 103.

She wrote in a letter, "There doesn't seem to be any sense in staying here longer. I have done all the dutiful things—spoken to a group of International Brigade people, made three recordings which will be translated, gone to a nursery and two hospitals, made a speech to be broadcast to Paris." [84]

All of this shuttling around was part of the Press Bureau's attempt to woo the United States and others to send economic and military support to the Republic. In her letter home, Hellman was pessimistic at their prospects for success. She wrote that she had had many "dinners with government people who said that I and all like me must explain, write, plead that the United States and France must send arms immediately. God in Heaven, who do they think I am, any of us?"[85] Although this aid never came in the scale that Loyalist Spain needed to win the war, the propaganda put out by the Press Bureau did reach U.S. Popular Front organizations.

Radio broadcasting was the most effective medium used to spread the Aid Spain message. Broadcasts could be recorded and replayed in different languages or in different countries. They also had staying power; many were transferred into print form and have survived over the years. *Volunteer for Freedom* printed Dorothy Parker's "No Axe to Grind" Madrid Radio broadcast of October 1937 in that November and circulated it in the United States.[86] Because the radio was so powerful, airtime was at a premium.

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[84] Lillian Hellman, Madrid, letter, 3 November 1937, from *An Unfinished Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 104.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Dorothy Parker, "No Axe to Grind," Madrid Radio broadcast, October 1937 from Volunteer for Freedom, 15 November 1937, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 294-296.

Lillian Hellman braved heavy shelling in Madrid to make it to the radio station for a broadcast because "they probably couldn't get the time on another night."[87]

Like radio broadcasts, speaking tours brought the war in Spain closer to home and were effective means of fundraising. As a result, the American Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy organized several of these tours. The moment nurses, relief workers, or correspondents left Spain they were surrounded by the press. One nurse wrote back to her friends who were still in Spain, "Here I've been in Paris since Tuesday and have been very busy seeing the sights, reporters, photographers and consuls."[88] Salaria Kee went on her speaking tour with Thyra Edwards, field organizer of the Medical Bureau and the NAC. Their mission was described in a press release as a "six weeks tour of principal cities to raise funds for another ambulance and more medical supplies."[89] Lini de Vries, a nurse with the first American Hospital Unit, was sent home in May of 1937 to go on a speaking tour to raise money.[90] Robert Hale Merriman convinced his wife Marion to leave him to go on a six-week U.S. tour. In her memoir, Marion remembered him telling her " 'it's so important, so important for you to get this story told as widely as possible.'"[91] Evelyn Hutchins and Ruth Davidow went on

[87] Lillian Hellman, Madrid, letter, 23 October 1937, from *An Unfinished Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 104.

[88] Gwendolyn, Paris, to [My Pets], 24 April 1937, Anne Taft Muldavin Collection, ALBA.

[89] American Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, press release, 25 August 193?, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[90] Fyrth and Alexander, 139.

[91] Lerude and Merriman, 180.

a tour together. The AMB press release said "both stress the importance of sending food and clothing to Spain."[92]

The organizers of these tours knew that sympathetic guest speakers raked in the donations and public support. Mildred Rackley wrote a letter to a colleague describing the importance of getting a wounded nurse to a fundraising meeting. She wrote, "It is absolutely imperative that Helen Freeman make a boat that will get her to New York in time for the June 9th meeting. … It will help our propaganda immensely. She must get on that boat."[93] The AMB was so effective at using sympathetic women speakers to fundraise that they were almost too busy. On the 24th of July 1938, Winifred Bates wrote to American Hospital Unit head Dr. Barsky proposing "a Delegation of International nurses to America…for the purposes of propaganda and raising money for Spain."[94] She received a response that the AMB was "completely loaded up with tours."[95]

Their efforts paid off. After Salaria Kee and Thyra Edwards lectured at the Hampton Institute, students formed a Committee to Aid Spain, the first organization of its type on an African-American campus.[96] Marion Merriman received a standing ovation and thousands of dollars in checks after speaking to a Hollywood cocktail party about anti-fascism and her husband's fight at the head of the Lincoln Brigade.[97]

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[92] American Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, press release, 193?, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[93] Mildred Rackley, Spain, to [My dear Tomas], 29 May 1938, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[94] Winifred Bates, Barcelona, to [Dr. Barsky], 24 July 1938, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[95] Herman F. Reissig, Executive Secretary, to [Winifred Bates], 25 August 1938, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[96] American Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, press release.

[97] Lerude and Merriman, 199-200.

High profile women were also effective tools to gain popular support. Eslanda Robeson, the prominent campaigner for black rights in the United States and wife of musician Paul Robeson, garnered publicity for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade when she toured Spain with her husband in January 1938.[98] Martha Gellhorn, famous for her war journalism and relationship with Hemingway, used her clout to push the Aid Spain movement in an interview with mainstream Collier's magazine. In a plug for the Lincoln Brigade soldiers, she said, "I'm as proud as a goat that the Americans are known in Spain as good men and fine soldiers. That's all there is to it: I'm proud."[99] Lillian Hellman was recruited to make a documentary film about Spain with Hemingway and Joris Ivens on the war. Although she did not end up working on the film that would become *The Spanish Earth*, she and Dorothy Parker threw a party for the showing of the film and raised thirteen thousand dollars to buy ambulances for Spain.[100]

Speaking tours, radio broadcasts and articles by U.S. women who participated in the Spanish Civil War were successful fundraising tools because their audience was largely female. Fifteen percent of three hundred committee heads of the Medical Bureau 1937 Enrollment Campaign for Medical Aid to Spain were women. Several of them were on the Women's Division Committee, Social Workers Committee, and the Theater Arts Committee.[101] The League of Women Shoppers, the Progressive Women's Council,

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[98] Fyrth and Alexander, 304.

[99] Martha Gellhorn, "Men Without Medals," Collier's, 15 January 1938, quoted in Warren Lerude and Marion Merriman, *American Commander in Spain: Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 177.

[100] Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman*, 66-67.

[101] American Medical Bureau, "1937 Enrollment Campaign for Medical Aid to Spain" (American Friends of Spanish Democracy, 1937), Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

the Spanish Child Welfare Association, and the Teachers' Union, all predominantly female organizations, attended one meeting of the Medical Bureau/North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.[102]

Publicity and fundraisers sponsored by these groups emphasized feminine values to reach a broader audience and legitimize the cause. Dorothy Parker arranged a soiree of "more than 100 leading personalities in the social and artistic worlds," a vast majority of them women, to benefit the Spanish Children's Milk Fund.[103] Wives of military officers organized the Women's Aid Commission to help Spanish women and children.[104]

In their broadcasts, the U.S. women volunteers were deliberately feminized. They spoke for traditionally female values: child welfare, education, literacy, and an end to senseless violence. Ruth Waller, a Medical Bureau nurse who helped set up a nursing school for Spanish women, went on the air in Madrid in January, 1938. On setting up the school she said, "I think that none of us working here can doubt the importance of the educational side of our jobs. We soon found out that the fight against illiteracy was a strong factor in the fight against fascism."[105] Dorothy Parker's "No Axe to Grind" broadcast was also filled with propaganda from a feminine perspective. She emphasized the great achievements of the Republican government in improving education in Spain, described the horror of air raids and the pride of Madrid residents who refused to

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[102] American Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, "Minutes of Special Meeting of Organization Representatives," 17 March 1938, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[103] Spanish Children's Milk Fund, press release, 15 November 193?, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[104] Monica Milward, "Women's Aid Commission," from diary, 16-17, Fredericka Martin Collection, ALBA.

[105] Ruth Waller, Madrid Radio broadcast, 10 January, 1938, from Jim Fyrth with Sally Alexander, ed., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), 162-163.

evacuate their homes.[106] During her January 9, 1938 broadcast by *Radio Newsreel*, Marion Merriman was asked about what clothes she wore while on duty. She responded, "I wear culottes rather than a skirt. When you are working and traveling with an army, there is no time for makeup and primping."[107] These feminine voices on the airwaves were intended to resonate with the broader population of U.S. women at home.

The purpose of Aid Spain publicity and fundraising was to make a change in U.S. foreign policy and raise money for medical supplies for Spain. In order to obtain legitimacy and support from political moderates, Aid Spain organizations were conservative about domestic issues. Portrayals of the women who became the movement's spokespeople were as conventional as possible. They spoke out for traditionally feminine causes of child welfare and hospital aid. Because the left was attempting to spread anti-fascism nationally, its propaganda did not challenge established gender definitions.

However, this did not stop the left from being a women's movement. Organizations run by women, concerned with feminine issues, and using female spokespeople drove fundraising for the American Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Already established social welfare organizations and church groups with female memberships took up the Aid Spain cause with relish. Although the movement was not promoting equal gender rights, it was creating a community of socially and politically active women who pushed for their cause to be realized.

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[106] Parker, "No Axe to Grind."

[107] Transcript, *Radio Newsreel*, New York, 9 January 1938, in a private collection of Marion Merriman Wachtel, quoted in Warren Lerude and Marion Merriman, *American Commander in Spain: Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 189.

Conclusion

The women of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and supporting organizations were not feminists. They participated in Spain in traditionally female occupations and cultivated family ties while abroad. Religious affiliation and a maternal concern with child welfare motivated many. These women mobilized against fascism, not gender inequalities. They enthusiastically formed women's organizations in support of Loyalist Spain to raise money for their husbands abroad, send over medical supplies, and get milk to Spanish orphans.

This trend of feminine activism in the Spanish Civil War has broad implications for the nature of gender politics in the American left in the 1930s. The movement to support Loyalist Spain is a window into the Popular Front as a whole. Specifically, women's involvement in Spanish Civil War is a model for female social activism at that time.

Feminism did not emerge in the 1930s for several reasons. The Depression triggered the labor union movement. Rising fascism in Europe mobilized the left and discouraged any challenge to established domestic norms. In the 1920s, an isolationist United States was more likely to promote social change. During this period U.S. women challenged gender boundaries by bobbing their hair and exploring sexual freedom. By the 1930s, however, attention turned towards international conflict and away from domestic social change. In order to increase support for the politically and economically liberal Popular Front, the U.S. left became increasingly conservative on domestic social

concerns. Therefore, actively leftist women were under pressure to remain in traditional gender roles in order to establish legitimacy for the movement.

If Salaria Kee, Marion Merriman and their peers were far from early feminists, why was a commemoration banquet held for them in 1977 and not 1957? Why did 1970s leftist Bay Area press relate to the stories of female ambulance drivers and nurses at the front lines and co-opt them as part of a pseudo-feminist history? In his book *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History,* historian Michel-Rolph Trouillet argues that history is a dichotomy consisting of both the facts of what happened and the narrative of those facts.[108] In this sense, the way in which women in the 1970s told the story of the Lincoln Brigade sisterhood is as historically significant as the actions of the women themselves.

The banquet of 1977 illustrates the feminist movement's need for role models. Female Bay Area leftists wanted a historical connection to politically active women in the past and the Lincoln Brigade provided this connection. Although they were not feminists, the women of the Lincoln Brigade and the Popular Front were a part of a women's movement. Whether nursing, reporting, or fundraising, from 1936 to 1939 U.S. women organized and fought together for a cause. This sense of female community was what resonated with Bay Area feminists in 1977.

[108] Michel-Rolph Trouillet, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2.

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