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FACING FASCISM

NEW YORK & THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

PETER N. CARROLL & JAMES D. FERNANDEZ



A black and white photograph of a crowded beach. In the upper portion, a banner is stretched across the sky with the text "BRING HOME WOUNDED AMERICANS FROM SPAIN". The lower portion shows a vast number of people sitting on the sand, many in swimwear, suggesting a public beach event or a large gathering. The sky is filled with clouds.

BRING HOME WOUNDED AMERICANS FROM SPAIN

FACING FASCISM:

NEW YORK AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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NUEVA YORK:

**THE SPANISH-SPEAKING
COMMUNITY RESPONDS**

BY JAMES D. FERNANDEZ

**PREVIOUS SPREAD**

Collecting change in Spanish Harlem for the Relief Ship for Spain, ca. 1938.

ABOVE

Labor organizer and Puerto Rican activist Jesús Colón speaks about Spain to members of the IWO's Spanish Section during an event at the Park Palace, October 1938.

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IN THE EVENING OF JULY 28, 1938, after putting her two young boys to bed, Mary Bessie looked down to the street from her walkup apartment at 25 State Street in Brooklyn Heights. What immediately caught her eye on the sidewalk below was the huge headline of a paper on a newsstand: “LEALES EN GANDESA.” The headline, referring to the advance of Loyalist troops on a fascist-controlled town in Catalonia, was of particular interest to this young mother, and she knew enough Spanish to decipher it. Her husband Alvah, a volunteer in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, was at that very moment taking part in the battle for Gandesa. But of course the headline in this Spanish-language daily was not addressed primarily to readers like Mary Bessie, but rather to the members of the significant—and growing—community of Spanish speakers in the city.¹

Ironically, the involvement of Hispanic New Yorkers in the Spanish Civil War is a rather neglected topic. Though Hispanic surnames are prominent on the list of volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (perhaps as many as 10 percent), surprisingly little is known about this group; we know more about the motives and activities of Jewish or African-American brigadistas, for example. But the prominent visibility of these three Spanish words on that Brooklyn street provokes a number of questions: Who were the Spanish-speaking and Spanish-reading New Yorkers in the late 1930s? How did they perceive, and react to, events in Spain? How did the war in Spain—and, more broadly, the antifascist movement—affect and even shape Spanish-language communities in the city? To begin to outline answers to these questions, let's open up a copy of that issue of *La Voz: Diario Democrático Avanzado* from July 28, 1938, and have a look inside.²



While there had been a small but visible Hispanic presence in New York throughout the 19th century—businessmen, political exiles, and workers among others—it was the aftermath of the Spanish-Cuban-American War (1895–1898) that changed the scale of that

presence. U.S. control of Cuba and Puerto Rico (beginning in 1898) and the granting of citizenship to Puerto Ricans (in 1917) were important milestones in the history of Latino migration to the United States. By 1938, approximately 200,000 speakers of Spanish were living in New York City.

The author of *New York Panorama* (1938) mentions four “Spanish-speaking districts or barrios” in the city: East Harlem, Washington Heights, the Brooklyn waterfront (from Red Hook to Brooklyn Heights), and the area by the Manhattan foot of the Brooklyn Bridge (around Cherry and Roosevelt Streets). Though the generic term “Spanish” was often used to refer to all Spanish speakers regardless of their country of origin, in fact, Spanish-speaking New Yorkers formed a heterogeneous group in the late 1930s, as they do today. This diversity is duly reflected in the pages of the city’s two Spanish-language dailies of the time, *La Prensa* and *La Voz*—the paper whose headline Mary Bessie noticed on that hot Brooklyn night. In both of these papers, a news report from Puerto Rico might appear alongside an item about politics in Cuba, or beside an update from the war in Spain. At the time, Puerto Ricans represented the largest and fastest-growing group of Spanish speakers in the city by far; Cubans were the next largest group; in the late 1930s, there may have been about 25,000 Spaniards in New York City.³

But it would be a mistake to imagine that these groups were neatly segmented and compartmentalized, or to imagine that these papers provided news from Puerto Rico for Puerto Ricans, from Spain for Spaniards, etc. In fact, what one can see clearly even on the pages of this single issue of *La Voz* are the multiple affiliations of each one of the city’s Spanish speakers, who are simultaneously New Yorkers, hispanos (the term apparently favored at the time for referring to people of Hispanic heritage living in New York), natives of this or that Spanish-speaking country, and citizens of the world. The reader of *La Voz* on July 28, 1938 was presumably interested in the spectacular suicide of John W. Ward (who the day before jumped off the cornice of the 17-storey Gotham Hotel) and the score of the Yankees game (7–5 over St. Louis); the announced divorce of Lupe Vélez and Johnny Weismuller; as well as the implementation of the Chaco Peace Treaty between Bolivia and Paraguay; the hopes for an armistice between Japan and China; the “wave of terror in Palestine;” and, of course, the rise of fascism in Europe.

Even before the 1930s, the different components of the city’s Spanish-speaking community had lived in close contact: in the *barrios*, in the trades (cigarmaking and construction in particular), on the waterfront, in the restaurant business, in union halls, and in neighborhood cultural and social organizations. Moreover, many of the Spaniards residing in the city had come to New York after significant stints in either Cuba or Puerto Rico. Three features of our July 28, 1938 issue of *La Voz* stand out because they neatly illustrate this commingling and show how the Spanish Civil War may well have accelerated the formation of a distinctive New York Latino identity. These sections in the paper exemplify how the war in Spain came to influence some of the most intimate aspects of the daily lives of these New Yorkers: their vacations, their leisure activities, and their civic/social associations. It would seem that this “civil war” raging 3,000 miles away was lived with palpable immediacy by many of the city’s hispanos.

First, this issue of *La Voz* features several advertisements for “Las Villas,” which were boarding houses or hotels in the Catskills area of the Hudson valley catering to the city’s Hispanic population. Ranging from small working farms that, to supplement their income, took in summer boarders, to full-scale resorts, these “villas” offered Spanish and Latin American cuisine to their guests (“cocina a la española y criolla”), who, like the city’s other ethnic groups, sought fresh food, clean air, and refuge from the city’s summer heat. But these vacation spots were by no means escapes from the political commitments and activism of the city’s Spanish speakers. Our issue of *La Voz* congratulates and thanks the New York City day visitors of “Villa Asturias” who, during their excursion to the countryside, participated in a fundraising raffle for Spain—the prize was a live lamb donated by a local farmer! And just a few days earlier, on July 23, a number of the larger villas (Villa Nueva, Villa García, Villa Madrid, Villa Rodríguez, and El Cortijo) had joined with the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to organize a Spanish Fiesta in Plattekill. An assembly of 350 vacationers was addressed by Lini Fuhr, one of the first American nurses to volunteer to go to Spain; the film *Heart of Spain* was viewed; and \$275 was collected to aid the Loyalist wounded.

La Voz also conscientiously covered the programming at the three Spanish-language theaters/cinemas in Manhattan—the Hispano, the Granada, and the Latino—which were important gathering spots for most of the city’s Spanish speakers throughout the 1930s. These venues offered a mix of live theater, film screenings, and other diversions; our July 28 issue of *La Voz* reviewed a wrestling match between a Basque and a Russian that had taken place a few days before at the Teatro Hispano. The films screened were a mix of the commercial fare of Spanish, Mexican, and Argentine cinema, with an occasional movie from the nascent U.S.-based Spanish-language film industry. These theaters—and others in the city, like the Cameo on 42nd Street—would also feature documentaries about the war in Spain. The taut ideological climate of the summer of 1938 can be gauged by a curious event reported in *La Voz*, *La Prensa*, and *The New York Times*: when the Teatro Hispano announced the premiere of *Morena Clara*, a film starring the Spanish actress Imperio Argentina, pro-Loyalist New Yorkers picketed the theater because the star was known to be a supporter of Franco. The management’s argument—that the film had been made during the Spanish Republic by a production company loyal to the country’s elected government—failed to persuade the picketers, who forced the theater to withdraw the film from the program.

For our purposes the most telling page of *La Voz* from July 28, 1938 is the section titled “Sociedades al día.” A daily feature of the paper, this section announced and reviewed the



TOP
Members of the IWO’s Spanish Section march in an antifascist parade in New York, ca. 1938.

BOTTOM
Certificate sent from the city of Valencia to the Confederated Spanish Societies in New York commemorating their efforts on behalf of the Republic, September 1938.



TOP
Pins from the Asturian Cultural Center in New York illustrate its efforts on behalf of Republican Spain.

BOTTOM
Ambulance donated to Spain by East Harlem’s Club Obrero Español, ca. 1938.



Illustration from *Frente Hispano* on fascist spy activity in the Americas, May 15, 1937.

activities of dozens of civic organizations—mutual aid societies, social clubs, and workers’ groups—that had been formed by the city’s Spanish-speaking communities. The number and diversity of these associations is astounding: on the pages of *La Voz* one can follow the activities of, for example, the Club Cubano Julio Antonio Mella in Washington Heights; the Grupo Antifascista del Bronx; Brooklyn’s Grupo Salmerón; the Sociedad Naturista, which founded the Spanish Camps on Staten Island; or the Frente Popular Español de Queens. There are clubs made up of emigrants from several of the regions of Spain—Andalucía, Asturias, the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia—as well as from a number of Latin American countries, most prominently Puerto Rico and Cuba. While some of these groups were formed in response to the Spanish Civil War, many others were not; it is remarkable to see how the Spanish Civil War came to color and shape the activities of virtually all of these bodies. After 1936, the picnics, soccer matches, excursions to the countryside, dances, raffles, and social events of these groups became invariably linked to the struggle against fascism and the desire to help Spain’s Loyalist forces. On that

single day, July 28, 1938, we learn of a Cuban club based in Manhattan celebrating a farewell party for a Spanish woman, Ernestina González, who was about to return to Spain after a fundraising trip to New York; of the José Díaz Branch of the Communist Party of the Bronx screening a film about Spain; and of the Ateneo Hispano of Brooklyn finishing its plans for a major fundraising picnic/fiesta to be held later that week in Ulmer Park in the Bath Beach section of Brooklyn.

During the war, most of these local associations banded together to form an umbrella organization called the Sociedades Hispanas Confederadas de Ayuda a España. This New York-based national pan-Hispanic confederation intensified the collaborations among the diverse, smaller groups and helped organize several major events, such as the July 19, 1937 rally in Madison Square Garden, attended by over 20,000. The amount of money raised during the course of the war in support of Republican Spain by the Sociedades Confederadas was second only to the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.



La Voz was a paper deeply sympathetic to the cause of the Spanish Republic; it would be a mistake to consider a single issue of a single newspaper as an impartial representation of the city’s Spanish-speaking communities. There were also pro-Franco Hispanics in the city during the war; the Casa de España, with headquarters in the Park Central Hotel, was their primary organization. Among the founding members of the Casa de España were the Spaniards Ramón Castroviejo, a distinguished eye surgeon at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital (who would carry out the first successful human cornea transplant), and Benito Collada, owner of El Chico nightclub on Grove Street in the Village (who would help popularize the “rumba” in the New York music scene). Other pro-Franco supporters were drawn from the worlds of business, journalism, and shipping, and included people from Puerto

Rico and Latin America. Nonetheless, even though at its peak the Casa de España might have had several hundred members, its leaders would at times complain bitterly about how the vast majority of Latinos in the city were pro-Republican: “we can count the real supporters of our movement on the fingers of two hands,” was how Dr. Castroviejo would put it.⁴

Hispanos in New York City have always lived in relatively close contact, in part because of linguistic and cultural ties. In the late 1930s, a powerful new link among many of these heterogeneous groups was forged: a deep concern over the rise of fascism. Though there was support for the fascist insurgents among some New York Hispanics, by and large, the city’s Spanish speakers mobilized en masse and across national lines in support of the Loyalist forces in Spain. During this period, older ties among different Latino groups in the city were reinforced, and new alliances were formed, among Latino groups and between those groups and other segments of New York’s ethnic-based progressive civil society. As is clear from even this brief overview of a single issue of that single newspaper gleaned by Mary Bessie on that Brooklyn newsstand, many New York Hispanics were deeply involved in the city’s antifascist movement and, interestingly, it would seem that 1930s antifascism played an important and enduring—if often overlooked—role in the evolution of the Spanish-speaking communities in the city. By way of example: In 1946, a group of Puerto Rican nationalists in New York would establish a weekly journal titled *Liberación*. The publication’s founding editor would be Aurelio Pérez, a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and its masthead would read: “Por la libertad de España, Puerto Rico, y demás países oprimidos” —“supporting the liberty of Spain, Puerto Rico, and other oppressed countries.” But that is another story, another paper on another newsstand, waiting to be opened.

Endnotes

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2 The full run of *La Voz* (1937–39) can be found on microfilm at the main branch of the New York Public Library.

3 *New York Panorama*, a Federal Writers Project initiative, contained essays with photographic illustrations (New York: 1938).

4 For more information on pro-Franco activities in New York, see Chapter Ten (“The Falange in the United States”) of *Falange: The Secret Axis Army in the Americas* by Alan Chase (New York: Putnam, 1943), and “Proyección de la Falange en los Estados Unidos (1936–39)” by Francisco A. Blanco, in the webzine “Rastroria”: <http://www.rumbos.net/rastroria/rastroria01/falangeusan1.htm>.