

Story by  
FLOYCE ALEXANDER

# Soul Without Frontiers

Reflections on history  
by a veteran of the  
Abraham Lincoln  
Brigade

ON JUNE 8, 1937 — not quite two months after celebrating his 19th birthday in Spain during that country's civil war — Robert Klonsky wrote a letter to his older brother in the United States:

Today is the 105th day that I have been at the front. For 105 days I have helped in a small way to keep the Madrid-Valencia highway open. I have had many close calls, and many hair-raising experiences. But fortunately I am still alive and healthy and comparatively none the worse for wear. I have been "over the top" twice, and the closest they've come to getting me was just a couple of bullet holes through my coat. Mac, that's the closest they'll ever get. I don't think they know how to spell my name. They're especially wary of names ending in "sky" — *comprende?*

Klonsky, who served eight months with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a group of American volunteer soldiers, was writing from the battlefront named for the small river flowing through the Jarama Valley. The Battle of Jarama began in November 1936, and by the time it was over — with the Madrid-Valencia highway still open — 45,000



*The Battle of Brunete, July 1937*

Courtesy of Robert Klonsky

soldiers lay dead on both sides of the front. Jarama marked the first defense of Madrid against the combined forces of Francisco Franco, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in the Spanish Civil War.

By the time the war was over, more than half of the Lincoln Brigade had died in Spain, and most of the survivors had been wounded repeatedly. Many of those who returned to the States — Klonsky included — again volunteered for combat duty during World War II, and for the same reason: to fight fascism.

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR began in the summer of 1936. Earlier, in February, the Second Republic — the Popular Front, a coalition of moderate and leftist forces known during the war as the Loyalists — gained control of the Spanish parliament through a legally conducted national election. Immediately, Spain's National Front — dominated by monarchists, large landowners and generals — began making plans to regain power by force.

One of the generals, Franco, was sent to Morocco, where the new government hoped to neutralize the threat posed by his army. However, in July, Franco's forces — now including Moorish troops and the Spanish Foreign Legion — invaded the Spanish mainland.

With the help of Hitler and Mussolini's troops and materiel, Franco moved north, meeting little effective resistance until he was repelled at Jarama.

Only the governments of the Soviet Union and Mexico came to the aid of the Second Republic. By the time the war began, Spain was already divided internally between those who opposed fascists, priests, landowners, the military and the aristocracy and those who opposed Marxists, anarchists, labor unions, agrarian reformers and poor people seeking political power. Now the country suddenly became a testing ground for the advanced combat technology that would dominate World War II.

Franco provided Hitler and Mussolini with a stage where they rehearsed their plan to bring the world to heel. As historian Raymond Carr puts it, "the Civil War became a crusade against the enemies of God: Masons, Jews, Marxists."

Madrid finally fell to Franco in March 1939, the civil war was declared over in April, World War II began in September, and Franco ruled Spain until his death in 1975.

ROBERT KLONSKY WAS one of 3,000 Americans who fought in Spain under the banner of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. The Lincoln Brigade was only a small part of the International Brigades — 35,000 volunteers from more than 50 countries. These men and women went to Spain to aid the Loyalists during an era in which fascist dictatorships were seizing power not only in Germany and Italy, but in places like Portugal, Greece, Poland, Yugoslavia and Manchuria as well.

Though few of the volunteers in the International Brigades knew Spanish, they soon became familiar with the phrase *soldado internacional* — international soldier. Miguel Hernández — a young poet and Loyalist resistance fighter who would die of tuberculosis after more than two years in a succession of Franco prisons — wrote that the *soldado internacional* possessed an *alma sin fronteras* — a soul without frontiers.

IN THE 1930s, Klonsky says, the people who went to Spain were hailed by a majority of Americans as heroes. However, after the end of World War II and the beginning of America's Cold War with the Soviet Union, the U.S. government began calling the volunteers "premature anti-fascists."

Between 1936 and 1938 — along with American doctors, nurses, drivers, engineers — the Lincoln volunteers defied the Roosevelt administration's insistence that the United States remain neutral toward the war in Spain. In spite of Franklin D. Roosevelt's overwhelming popularity and the economic conditions of the Depression, money was raised in the States to send ambulances and medical supplies to the Loyalist front. "The New York

## The Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War were heroes at home in 1937, says Klonsky; but a decade later, they were "premature anti-fascists."

Times," Klonsky says, "estimated that over 80 percent of the American people supported Spain's Republican government."

KLONSKY — WHO NOW lives in Santa Fe — believes a relation exists between the consequences of his government's refusal to come to Spain's aid 50 years ago and America's role in the world today.

The occasion for Klonsky's attempt to bridge 50 years of history was provided by President Ronald Reagan. Twice during 1986 — the year marking the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War — Klonsky listened to Reagan compare the Lincoln Brigade to the contra forces trying to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The first time occurred on March 16 during one of Reagan's speeches meant to influence the congressional vote on contra aid. After declaring that the contras were "freedom fighters" in the tradition of the Lincoln Brigade, the president added that unlike the contras, the Americans in Spain "fought on the wrong side."

"Those are his exact words," Klonsky says. "Wrong side? We were bombed by Nazi planes! Is

that the side we should have been on? If so, where does that put Reagan?"

Last October, Reagan compared "something called the Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War" to American citizens who were helping to sustain the contra war — which had to proceed without congressional funding. Again, Klonsky was outraged by the president's attempt to link the Lincoln Brigade with the contras: "They're mercenaries — getting paid. We didn't go there to get paid! There were men and women who gave up careers here to go there for no remuneration whatever."

Then, as though he were now speaking to Reagan himself, Klonsky added: "Don't make such miserable comparisons. We're talking about two different breeds of people. It's insulting!"

TODAY, KLONSKY IS one of 300 members of the Lincoln Brigade still alive. Although he may be the only veteran living in New Mexico, he stays in contact with other brigade members through the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade — the VALB, for short — whose small office is in New York City. The VALB attempts to set the historical



Members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade back at New York, December 1938

Associated Press

record straight, a task it believes is crucial to the preservation of American democratic values and principles of social justice.

Recent years, the VALB has engaged in such political efforts as the resistance to the Vietnam War during the 1960s and the nuclear-freeze movement of the early 1980s.

More recently, the veterans have been concerned about the Reagan Doctrine — they see it as a new Cold War policy featuring low-intensity warfare and covert projects meant to roll back rather than contain what Reagan once called the Soviet Union's "evil empire." The VALB fears that U.S. policy may result not only in new puppet dictators in Third World countries — a part they as well as many historians claim Franco played for Hitler and Mussolini — but in a planet brought closer than ever to the apocalyptic edge of nuclear war.

Last year, for example, the VALB raised enough money to send 11 ambulances to Nicaragua to aid the Sandinistas — two thirds of the 16 ambulances now in operation in Nicaragua. "We set out to raise enough money for one ambulance," Klonsky says. "But we raised enough for 11. I was very proud."

SIX YEARS AGO, after 40 years in Los Angeles, Klonsky grew weary of the smog and moved to Santa Fe. Before Spain and World War II — in which he served as a driver with the 713th flame-throwing tank battalion in combat in Saipan and Okinawa — New York City was his home.

Born March 12, 1918, Klonsky grew up in the

## The veterans fear U.S. policy may result in new puppet dictators in Third World countries — a part they and many historians claim Franco played for Hitler and Mussolini.

community of Brownsville in Brooklyn. Political thinking and political action were daily elements in Brownsville, whose people, Klonsky says, "reflected and suffered from the full impact of what was happening in the working-class communities all over the country back in the late '30s."

Klonsky recalls how his father, an unemployed garment worker, fought desperately to feed a family of eight. "All the families around us were in the same boat. All my teen-age friends went home to the same atmosphere, the same conditions that I faced. Jobs were impossible to find. Many of us left home only because we couldn't stand being around that kind of thing, and we wanted to relieve our parents of one additional mouth to feed."

Klonsky, who is of Russian Jewish heritage, says that 300 men from Brownsville alone volunteered for the Lincoln Brigade — roughly 10 percent of all Americans who went to Spain. "Primarily, they were Jewish, and the issues of Nazism and fascism were very central to their thinking and their feelings. Their fellow Jewish human beings were

being slaughtered over there, and the impact was felt at home. Consequently, they were anti-fascists before they went to Spain."

Irish, Polish and Italian working-class people in Brownsville also went to Spain, he says. "They were anti-fascists, too. Many of them didn't fully understand what being anti-fascist meant. It was more an emotional feeling, a nationalistic feeling, a feeling of... 'Hey, they're hurting my people! My people!... My fellow human beings.'"

NOT ALL OF those who went to Spain were working-class Americans. David McKelvy White was an English professor at Brooklyn College and the son of a former city governor. (A New York Public Library archive of VALB documents is named the David McKelvy White Collection.) "He came to Spain to fight," Klonsky says. "Not because the fascists were hurting his people necessarily, but because of his understanding of what the broader issues were, the issues that one discussed on a higher level — the theoretical questions, like What is fascism? He and I had many such discussions."

"Or another man whose name does not appear in any history. So many who have not been mentioned. I'm not speaking of myself but of others. Unfortunately, they've been bypassed."

"One wonderful guy, John Lenther, was an actor. I think he was from Boston. How he ever got to Spain I don't know. He didn't fit the role of a combat soldier. They should never have let him go. But you couldn't stop that man, no matter what happened."

"The guy was tremendously and movingly affected by all that had happened in Spain before his arrival. He wanted to do something to stop the slaughter. Highly personalized, highly emotional, subjective kind of feeling about him. So he went."

"There was the battle of Jarama, Feb. 27, 1937. I was out in the field, in the so-called no man's land. John Lenther was about 50 yards to my right. And the firepower that was being directed against us was enormous. A slaughter was taking place. John Lenther was out in the field there, on bended knee, upright, where anybody could see him, where any fascist could shoot him. And there he was, firing away. He was performing! And I watched him get hit and killed, right in front of me. Standing there in a position that no soldier with any sense of understanding about protecting yourself under fire would ever take. And he stood there and kept on firing his gun while he was being... moved down."

A man not given to emotional display was to whom feeling is crucial, Klonsky completes the story of his friend's death with an unmistakable catch in the breath of his voice.

GOING TO SPAIN in 1937 was more difficult for an American than traveling in Cuba, say, is today. "We were going to fight," Klonsky says. "We were going to a war to participate in actual armed combat. We watched the law, and consequently, we had to go through all sorts of subterfuge to get to the war."

The law to which Klonsky refers, which prohibited Americans recruited in the United States from fighting in another country's army, led to the practice of stamping American passports "Not valid for Spain" — a practice that began two weeks after the first Lincoln Brigade left New York harbor on the day after Christmas 1936.

"Halfway through my 18th year," Klonsky recalls, "a number of my Brownsville contemporaries formed an ad hoc committee to pull people together

work that way anymore. But they still haven't learned those lessons from Spain."

Another thing, Back in the '30s, when we were in Spain, nuclear bombs didn't exist. Now that the bomb is here, invading Nicaragua is playing around with the fate of the world."

That's the lesson: You can't repeat Spain anymore. You can't just destroy a democratically elected government, as you did in Spain, and figure to get away with it, because now you're threatening the whole Latin American continent, as well as the future of humanity."

ALEXANDER: What, then, do you make of the Nixon administration's involvement in the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende's democratically elected socialist government in Chile? (Augusto Pinochet's been in power there well over a decade now.

KLONSKY: Chile's an example of what we're talking about. Pinochet is one guy whose seat I would want to be in! His longevity is in jeopardy."

The Alliance coup was typical of the pattern. You just used military force to overthrow Allende, and it was considered finished, as if we were Spain. But it didn't end there. That's where the change takes place."

The reason why the mere elimination of Allende was not a parallel to, an exact duplication of, Spain is because things have changed in the world since. These people have reached the point where they're willing to fight now because the consequences of not fighting are worse than fighting. After living under certain conditions decade after decade after decade, watching your children die, watching the infant mortality rate climb — where so many kids no longer live beyond the age of 5 — these people have learned to say: "Why should we let this go on? Let's change it once and for all."

So our powers that be had better learn: It's not going to happen as it did in Spain. Even in Spain, we didn't win eventually. Franco's not there. He's gone. That's the point."

On March 19 — exactly one week after Robert Klonsky's 69th birthday — President Reagan again mentioned "a thing called the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain in the civil war there." The occasion was the president's second press conference following the Iran-contra revelations last November.

The situation unfolding in Central America was a subject Klonsky continually returned to during the many hours of our extended interview conducted in Santa Fe beginning last September.

— FLOYCE ALEXANDER

KLONSKY: If we don't learn the lessons of the Spanish Civil War, we're not going to be able to handle what's bubbling between the eyes today. We're going to make the same stupid mistakes. And nobody in America — I don't care who they are — can be proud of those stupid mistakes, because that's what they are. Spain, Vietnam — stupid errors.

Or maybe they're not errors. Maybe they were an attempt (by) certain elements in this country to fight through a policy that is to their best interest, even though it would hurt the best interests of the majority of the American people. And they failed.

They failed in Vietnam. Vietnam was not a mistake. It was a policy that went astray, that didn't work for them. What they're talking about in Nicaragua today is not a mistake. It's a conscious effort to push through a policy that's going to bounce back at them. They're going to set off a fire. It's going to envelop them."

What do they think is going to happen if they invade Nicaragua? Do they think everybody is going to stand by and watch it calmly, as you watch a prize fight? It's going to set off a blaze throughout the Americas. Every revolutionary and so-called rebel army fighting down there — every guerrilla army fighting down there — is going to take that as their cue.

This isn't 20, 30 years ago, when we could go into Guatemala and get rid of the president, send the Marines down there to clean it up. It doesn't

## Klonsky on Latin America



Courtesy of Robert Klonsky



Courtesy of Robert Klonsky

19-year-old Klonsky, above, rested behind the lines at Villanueva de la Cañada, just before the Battle of Brunete, left, in July 1937

who wanted to go to Spain, and they asked me if I wanted to go because they knew I was very much aware of what was happening there."

At 5 a.m. on Feb. 9, 1937, Klonsky, with 300 others, mounted the gangplank of the ship *Ile de France*. The ship docked at Marseilles, France, 13 days later. "Going through customs," he says, "each of us was asked, 'Where are you going?' One student said he was on his way to Italy, and another replied that he was going to medical school elsewhere, while this one was going to art school somewhere else, and that one was on vacation."

"Three hundred men, opening up the same suitcases containing the very same articles. They were the same socks and the same shirts we'd picked up in New York at the same army and navy shop — one of those clothing places in lower Manhattan that sold boots and other khaki clothing."

FROM MARSEILLES THEY moved to Perpignan, France, and from there, Klonsky's company crossed the Pyrenees at night with the help of a Spanish guide.

In Figueras, an ancient Catalan town, Klonsky recalls putting up in an old castle. "At least a thousand men, members of the International Brigades from all over Europe, were sleeping on cots in the basement."

Klonsky was moved by the sight: "I knew then that we were establishing a historical precedent. That we were doing had never been done before by an American. Here, in this huge hall, we were taking our place with others in the world."

On the morning Klonsky's company left Figueras, Spanish peasants brought baskets of oranges to the train and handed them to the men through the open windows. Klonsky remembers orange peelings flying from the train's windows as it pulled away from the station, gathering steam for its run to Albacete.

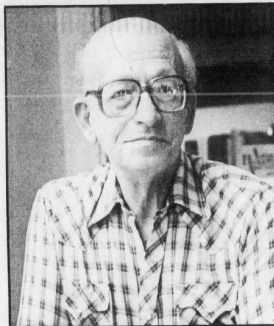
At Albacete, the town serving as headquarters of the International Brigades, the volunteers received their assignments to the various battlefronts. Most of them went to Jarama, where, Klonsky says, "a limited number of Americans had arrived and fought before we did."

"As we got out of our trucks, we were each handed a rifle and a clip of five bullets. We were shown how to put it into the rifle, right there in the field. 'Fire those five shots up against that hill,' we were told. 'And when you get through with that, move up the road, where you'll be met by Sgt. So-and-so, who will take you to the front lines,' which were several hundred yards ahead of us." That was the full extent of the training Klonsky and his company received before going into battle that day at Jarama.

Klonsky was in Spain from February to October 1937. After Jarama, where he stayed until June, he took part in the Battle of Brunete in July, another major defense of Madrid. At Brunete, he was ordered out of the lines when he inexplicably suffered a severe drop in weight, from 175 to 140 pounds. That condition eventually resulted in his having to leave Spain. Back in the United States, he raised money and engendered support for the Lincoln Brigade and the Spanish Loyalist cause.

DURING THE McCARTHY era of the late '40s and early '50s, Lincoln veterans were characterized as "premature anti-fascists," a phrase that continues to rouse Klonsky's ire: "Can you beat fascism too soon, too early?"

As punishment for defying their government's policy of refusing aid to the Spanish Republic, the Lincoln veterans were labeled Soviet dupes. After



## "We were taking our place with others in the world," says Klonsky.

all, Stalin (as well as Mexico's president, Lázaro Cárdenas) had supplied Spain's government with aid in an attempt to counter the assistance that Hitler and Mussolini provided to Franco's insurgents.

In January 1937, when the U.S. Embargo Act became law, banning shipments of arms to Spain, Franco congratulated President Roosevelt for behaving like a "true gentleman," while Hitler also praised the Embargo Act.

Later, Roosevelt admitted that U.S. neutrality "most likely aided the aggressor and prevented aid from reaching the victims of aggression." And in 1948, FDR's secretary of state, Cordell Hull, confessed that he had known all along — and kept secret — that American companies such as Texaco, DuPont, General Motors, Ford and Studebaker were shipping fuel, bombs and trucks that were vital to Franco's war effort.

WHEN KLONSKY DECLARES that his country has refused to learn "the lessons of history," he echoes the frequently cited warning — sometimes attributed to conservative philosopher George Santayana — that those who do not learn from the mistakes of history are condemned to repeat them. As a contemporary example, Klonsky points to the recent revelations surrounding the Reagan administration's secret arms sales to Iran, with profits apparently used to fund the Contras.

"Historical distortion" of the Spanish Civil War, says Klonsky, makes such folly possible 50 years later. He refers to a tendentious anti-communist version of the war: "These people claim that we were fighting the war under false pretenses and were all a bunch of communists who actually were not interested in defending democracy there — that we were just riding the coattails of the fight for freedom and democracy, and against fascism, to impose a communist dictatorship."

"There is this myth of Soviet domination, communist domination and communist control over all these events — from Spain to Cuba to Vietnam, to Nicaragua and El Salvador today."

"You can say: Poverty? That has nothing to do with it. The communists, the Russians — that's the answer! Disease, hunger — you name it — have

nothing to do with the social and revolutionary changes developed in the last 70 years."

WHEN HE FIRST fired his rifle into the hillside, shortly before entering battle, Klonsky says, "I didn't see a Russian nearby." During the Battle of Jarama, "I didn't see a Russian anywhere around." Nor did he encounter the Soviets at Villanueva de la Cañada, where he rested behind the lines before the Battle of Brunete. And at Brunete, the same.

"But, yes," he says, "I ran into Russians over there because they were sending people, too. Just as we went, they went. But not in such numbers. I fired bullets at Italian fascists and German Nazis. No doubt about that! But I did not fight with Soviet soldiers. I fought with a Soviet rifle."

"I met a Russian colonel once, in Madrid. But he didn't have an army behind him. He was there alone. And there were others. No one is going to deny that there were Soviet army men in Spain. But if they hadn't been there, they would have been criticized for not helping Spain during the war. As the governments of the United States, France and England were criticized because of their non-intervention policies." Without Soviet and Mexican aid, Klonsky claims, the Republican Loyalists would have succumbed much sooner to Franco.

Then, as though addressing a half-century of critics who either denigrate or deplore the VALB view of the war, he adds, "You can start reading into the Soviet actions all sorts of motivation. You can say they were just out to perpetuate or extend or strengthen their own objectives. Their objective was to defeat fascism? That's all right with me, too. I can't fault them for that."

"What else did they have for their objective? To take over Spain? Well, that's sheer nonsense. I've been there, and I realize now, more than ever, that they could not have done it. That notion wasn't real. It was fantasy."

"From the moment that event took place in Spain, there has been a conscious effort on the part of the powers that be in this country to cover up, to hide it, to change its character, to camouflage it — to give it every possible coloration than what it was."

"Even as a young man in Brownsville, when we marched down Broadway against the Nazis, the newspapers called us a communist and Russian-inspired movement. We had about as much connection with the Soviet Union or with communists at that time as my 3-year-old grandson has with it today."

"But this is the line, the technique, the most effective argument found in an attempt to split us, to divide us, to belittle us and to raise havoc with any effort we make. A very effective tool, but it's becoming less effective, and by now it's wearing thin. It's time that grown men and women rejected this kind of nonsense."

IN 1971 COLUMNIST Pete Hamill described the VALB's annual dinner in New York: "They went upstairs to a bright room, and drank a lot of whiskey at the bar, and there was nothing at all to indicate that they were the best Americans of their generation. They were the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and to be able to say that about yourself might be the only badge of honor that is worth having."

"It has been a long, lonely time for them in the years since Franco's legions finally marched into

# BRIGADE

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Barcelona. Never have so many good men been treated so badly by a supposedly civilized nation. They had gone to Spain because they loved America and wanted its honors preserved; when they came home, America kicked them in the teeth.

"When the evening was over, they exchanged addresses and phone numbers, and collected the coats and went back into the strange country that America has become in the years since they were young."

IN SAN FRANCISCO, in the early '70s, Klonsky had one of the most moving experiences of his life. He was there to march with a contingent of 50 or 60 Lincoln veterans in a demonstration protesting the Vietnam War. "It was getting toward the climax of that war," he says. "There were 100,000 — maybe 150,000. An enormous event. And we marched — the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

"As the parade began, we were told that we had left too soon and a number of veterans had been left behind. We were advised that we should break out of the line and wait along the curb until they caught up with us. Meanwhile, this parade, this demonstration, was going by with all of the placards and signs calling for an end to the war. And our banners were there, too: VETERANS OF THE ABRAHAM LIN-

**"Are you the men  
who fought in Spain?  
Back in 1937?" She  
burst into tears.**

COLN BRIGADE — out there as bright as day.

"As we were standing there, a group of young people came by. They were looking at us and talking. One kid came over to us to ask, 'Who are you? Are you with us or against us?' So we explained to this young man what we were all about.

"And then another young woman came by. She stopped, left her friends and came over to us with a look on her face, a strange look, very puzzled. She said: 'Are you the men who fought in Spain? Back in 1937?' We said, 'We are.' And she burst into tears. 'You are the people my father's been telling me about? I know you people! My father told me what wonderful people you are! You were heroes!' And she grabbed me, and then moved from me to another one — gave us hugs and kisses.

"She ran back to the line of the march, and as she kept moving with the others, she caught up with her group. She kept talking and pointing back at us, indicating that she was telling them all about us."

Recently, within a two-week span, Klonsky learned of the deaths of four fellow veterans. And the rest of the group is dwindling quickly, he says. Klonsky himself suffered a stroke two years ago. "We are so few, we would like to pass on as much of our experience as we can."

That moment with the young woman in San Francisco was crucial for Klonsky. "When she told me, with tears in her eyes, 'I know you people! The Abraham Lincoln Brigade,' I realized that we are being carried forward by others. That justified everything to me. I knew then that there's a new generation picking it up, learning about it. Nothing has been wasted." ■

*Floyce Alexander is an Albuquerque poet.*