

Planting Seeds: Black American Soldiers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Expansion of American Democracy



American volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade carrying a banner in a battalion parade in Barcelona (January 6, 1937).¹

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2660 words

¹ Herreros, Sebastià. "The International Brigades in the Spanish War 1936-1939: Flags and Symbols." The XIX International Congress of Vexillology. The Flag Institute. Accessed May 30, 2024, 150. <https://www.flaginstitute.org/pdfs/Sebastia%20Herreros.pdf>.

Introduction

Americans often remember World War II as the United States' defining battle against fascism. Although the war mobilized many Americans to devote themselves to achieving the single task of total economic, political, and social victory, many Americans had already taken up arms against fascism years earlier in the Spanish Civil War.

Conflict in Spain began on July 17th, 1936, as pro-fascist Francisco Franco, leader of the Nationalist forces, led a coup in an attempt to overthrow the democratically elected Republican government of Spain.² By this time, economic and political unrest brought on by the lasting effects of World War I and the Great Depression had swayed the American public towards avoiding political and military conflict worldwide.³ This led to a period of American isolationism in the 1930s, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) opted to take a neutral stance on the Spanish Civil War. However, as the war raged on, FDR's perspective changed, and near the end of the conflict, FDR admitted the error of his stance, stating, "We have made a mistake."⁴ Although the American government refrained from taking a stand against undemocratic forces, such as fascism, the people did. Between 1936 and 1939, there remained a significant undercurrent of anti-fascist sentiment among the American public, stemming from core American values celebrating democracy, freedom, and resistance to tyranny.⁵ Years before FDR's confession, in sharp defiance of a flawed U.S. foreign policy, a group of brave Americans

² T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Spanish Civil War." Britannica. Last modified May 9, 2024. Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Spanish-Civil-War>.

³ Milestones: 1937-1945 - American Isolationism in the 1930s." Office of the Historian. Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/american-isolationism#:~:text=During%20the%201930s%2C%20the%20combination,non%2Dentanglement%20in%20international%20politics>.

⁴ Loewenheim, Francis L. "The Diffidence of Power: Some Notes and Reflections on the American Road to Munich." Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies 58, no. 4 (1972): 78. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63089>.

⁵ "Online Lesson: The Spanish Civil War: U.S. Foreign Policy between the World Wars." The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://alba-valb.org/online-lesson-plan-the-spanish-civil-war-u-s-foreign-policy-between-the-world-wars/>.

volunteered to fight against Franco's fascist Nationalist forces to defend democracy abroad in an organized unit called the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Approximately 2,800 Americans volunteered, 900 of whom were killed in action.⁶ Among them were about 90 Black Americans who fought the war on two fronts: in Spain, against fascism, and at home, against racial discrimination, segregation, and lynching.⁷ As volunteers, they joined the Brigade to support the anti-fascist cause, but they were also hoping for a change in their country. By breaking racial barriers in military integration and directly confronting fascism abroad, Black Americans in the Brigade not only provided a glimpse into the future of a desegregated military and the successes of the civil rights movements but also proved the interconnected struggle for justice both at home and abroad. Their opposition to fascism was sustained beyond the Spanish Civil War, carrying their efforts into World War II and the extended struggle for human rights within the U.S. and across the globe. Thus, this paper argues that, though not automatically realized at the moment, Black American participation as part of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War resulted in the significant expansion of American democracy.

Democracy versus Fascism and the Motivations of Black American Volunteers

Since the founding of the United States, the Declaration of Independence has affirmed its citizen's right to democracy. American democracy, a government rooted in the principles of liberty, equality, and justice, has been at the forefront of the country's history. In this system, the supreme power rests with the people, who exercise it directly or indirectly through elected

⁶ T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Abraham Lincoln Battalion." Britannica. Last modified December 27, 2017. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Abraham-Lincoln-Battalion>.

⁷ "Online Lesson: African Americans in the Spanish Civil War." The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://alba-valb.org/online-lesson-african-americans-in-the-spanish-civil-war/>.

representatives in regularly held free elections.⁸ In the context of this paper, civil rights refer to the rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality, particularly focusing on the fight against racial discrimination. On the other hand, fascism, as exemplified by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, is a political philosophy, movement, or regime that elevates the nation, and often race, above the individual. It emphasizes a centralized autocratic government led by a dictator and forcibly suppresses opposition.⁹ The fundamental opposition between American democracy and fascism is stark and undeniable. From afar, the two ideologies represent diametrically opposed views regarding the role of the individual in society and the structure of the government. American democracy values individual freedoms and participatory governance through elections, while fascism prioritizes nationalistic and racial ideals under authoritarian rule.

However, for most of its history, the U.S. has been a racially stratified society, and America's defining promises of freedom, equality, and opportunity have often rung hollow in the ears of Black Americans. As a society, America exalted White Americans at the expense of Black Americans through systemic racial oppression and discrimination (from slavery to tight segregation), frequently violating fundamental human rights. This contradiction between the American democratic ideals and the lived reality of Black Americans set the stage for the participation of Black Americans in the Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, as they saw the fight against fascism abroad as inherently linked to their struggle for civil rights at home.

Personal narratives of Black Americans in the Brigade vividly capture their experiences and motivations to contribute to the Republic in Spain. Why did they voluntarily risk their lives

⁸ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "democracy." Merriam-Webster. accessed May 26, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy>.

⁹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "fascism." Merriam-Webster. accessed May 26, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fascism>.

to fight a war in a distant country? What led them to willingly defend people with whom they did not share a common language, culture, or background? One such account is provided by Canute Frankson, a Jamaican-born mechanic who left his home in Detroit to join the Brigade.

Frankson's letter from the front lines demonstrates the ideological and emotional commitments that drove Black Americans to join the Brigade. Only two months after arriving in Spain, Frankson wrote a letter to a "dear friend" on July 6th, 1937, and in it, he states:

On the battlefields of Spain we fight for the preservation of democracy. Here, we're laying the foundation for world peace, and for the liberation of my people, and of the human race.¹⁰

In this excerpt, Frankson articulates a vision of the Spanish Civil War as a battleground in the global struggle for democracy. He frames the conflict as an opportunity to combat oppression in all its forms. Hence, the defeat of fascism in Spain would contribute to a broader movement toward world peace and human liberation. Moreover, Frankson saw the war as interconnected with a larger global struggle against oppression as he asserts:

If we crush Fascism here, we'll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world, from the vicious prosecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's Fascist heels.¹¹

Frankson's reflection reveals his belief that by fighting fascism in Spain, he and his comrades were defending vulnerable populations everywhere, including Black Americans. He recognized the parallels between the atrocities faced by Jews under Hitler and the historical and ongoing oppression of Black Americans. Simultaneously, he subtly exposes the hypocrisy of a nation that professed democratic values while tolerating Jim Crow laws. His decision to leave his

¹⁰ Frankson, Canute. Letter, July 6, 1937. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://alba-valb.org/resource/letter-from-canute-frankson/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

home and risk his life in Spain embodies the universal values of freedom, equality, and human dignity. He fought for democracy and for the civil rights that were denied to him in his own country. Frankson's motivations are further illustrated as he concluded his letter, writing:

“We will build us a new society—a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line, no jim-crow trains, no lynching. That is why, my dear, I'm here in Spain.”¹²

Frankson's vision of a society free from racial oppression, where true equality and justice prevail, reveals his hope for a change in his country. Especially at a time when discrimination, segregation, and lynching were custom and prevalent, his aspiration for “a new society” was reflective of the broader goals Black Americans shared in their fight for civil rights. Thus, by fighting in Spain, Frankson and his fellow Black volunteers were not only combating fascism but also striving to create a world where the principles of democracy could be fully realized for all people, irrespective of race.

Langston Hughes: Bridging the Fight Against Fascism and Racism

Although not a combatant himself, Langston Hughes played an essential role in shaping the narrative of the Spanish Civil War through his work as a war correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper.¹³ Hughes' poems and essays linked the struggle against fascism abroad to the fight for civil rights in the U.S. His public support for the Republican cause provided a cultural and ideological bridge between these battles. In his poem “Love Letter From Spain: Addressed to Alabama,” Hughes embodied a Southern Black American volunteer of the Brigade named Johnny, who wrote to his girlfriend in Alabama:

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Soto, Isabel. "I Knew That Spain Once Belonged to the Moors' Langston Hughes, Race, and the Spanish Civil War," abstract, *Research in African Literatures* 45, no. 3 (2014): 130-46. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.45.3.130>.

Just now I'm goin;
To take a Fascist town.
Fascists is Jim Crow peoples, honey
And here we shoot 'em down¹⁴

As with many Black American volunteers, Hughes found resonance of fascist-esque Jim Crow laws at home in Franco's fascism he witnessed in Spain. Through the soldier's ideological reflection, Hughes equated the fight against fascism in Spain with the fight against racism at home, suggesting that victory in Spain is a step toward justice in America. In another perspective, by documenting how Black men were arming themselves to resist this ideology actively, he subtly argued that similar, radical actions could be taken to combat racism in the U.S. Furthermore, the line "Fascists is Jim Crow peoples" effectively collapsed the distinctions between the various forms of oppression that manifest in different regions of the world. He asserts that America's racists are no different from Franco's fascists.

In "Soldiers from Many Lands," Hughes further elaborated on this very theme with the powerful statement, "Give Franco a hood, and he would be a member of the Ku Klux Klan."¹⁵ By directly comparing Franco to the Ku Klux Klan, Hughes connects race, African American participation in the war, the rise of fascism in Spain and Europe, and the racial situation in the U.S. His analogy emphasizes that the ideologies of fascism and racial segregation are fundamentally the same: both rely on instilling fear, maintaining systemic inequality, and using violence to uphold unjust power structures.

¹⁴ Hughes, Langston. "Addressed to Alabama." *The Daily People's World Magazine*, January 22, 1938. Accessed May 29, 2024, 8.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/peoples-world/n529-v1n19-sec2-mag-jan-22-1938-MPDW.pdf>.

¹⁵ Soto, Isabel. "I Knew That Spain Once Belonged to the Moors' Langston Hughes, Race, and the Spanish Civil War," *Research in African Literatures* 45, no. 3 (2014): 130-46, 137. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritelite.45.3.130>.

Hughes' "Love Letter From Spain" and "Soldiers from Many Lands" highlight the universality of oppression and the interconnected struggles for justice and equality faced by marginalized groups worldwide. His documentation demonstrates that the war provided a platform to confront racial issues. Consequently, Hughes' works provided a voice for Black American volunteers and encouraged them to view their fight for justice as a part of a global movement, broadening the scope and impact of American democratic ideals.

Desegregation in the Brigade

The Brigade was part of a larger effort to fight against Franco's Nationalist forces, who were already bolstered by substantial aid from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Alongside the Soviet Union and the International Brigade, 2,800 Americans supported the Republican cause.¹⁶ Indeed, the Americans fought with the Soviets. Still, it is to be noted that the supposedly democratic forces of the Soviet Union and the U.S. were divided in that while the Soviets fought for a political aim (to support communist factions), the Americans were there for personal commitment. Although the few Black Americans who volunteered only accounted for 2.6% of the International Brigade, they desegregated the army, allowing, for the first time in American history, Black American troops to hold positions that led them to command white troops.¹⁷ Such unprecedented feats of desegregation occurred due to the fundamental ideology of the volunteers and the Brigade. As Alvah Bessie, a White American front-line combat unit volunteer, noted in his memoir,

¹⁶ T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Abraham Lincoln Battalion." Britannica. Last modified December 27, 2017. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Abraham-Lincoln-Battalion>.

¹⁷ Carroll, Peter N. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994, 18.

The battalion's name—Abraham Lincoln—was not chosen idly, for Lincoln represented to us all that aspect of the American democratic tradition that will live forever and forever honor the name of the United States: the struggle against human slavery, against exploitation of the poor by the rich, the fight for decency and human progress against those forces that would hold all peoples back from the achievement of their great potential.¹⁸

Bessie emphasizes that the name “Abraham Lincoln” was deliberately chosen to represent the enduring values of the American democratic tradition. The symbolism of Abraham Lincoln, the president who had proclaimed emancipation and fought for the U.S. during the American Civil War, as a democratic figure portrays the Brigade's broader fight against oppression. Furthermore, because of this ideology, the Brigade was democratized, as Bessie described:

We were not an army of automatons under the absolute authority of an unquestionable command. We were an army of responsible, thinking men. We elected our political delegates—an officer who does not exist in any of the finance controlled armies of the so-called democracies. (...) The majority opinion ruled.¹⁹

This democratic process within the Brigade allowed numerous issues to be resolved, but more importantly, it allowed anyone to be appointed to positions of leadership, power, and authority. The selection process was based on merit rather than race. At the time, this was unprecedented: the election of many Black Americans to positions of high command by their predominantly White army would have been unimaginable due to the segregated nature of the

¹⁸ Bessie, Alvah. *Men in Battle: A Story of Americans in Spain*. San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp, 1975, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 54.

U.S. Army. It was this very democratic ideology of the Brigade that led Oliver Law, a former labor activist, to become the first Black commander of an American army on June 12th, 1937.²⁰

Oliver Law and His Legacy

From 1919 to 1925, Law served under the U.S. Army as a private in the 24th Infantry, a segregated Black unit posted on the Mexican Border. During this time, as a Black man in the Army, the U.S. War Department policy disallowed him to assume higher roles. After serving for six years, he only left as a “buck private.”²¹ On the contrary, Law’s leadership qualities and previous experience were immediately valued in Spain. When he joined the Brigade in Spain in mid-January 1937, Law started as a section leader and then was promoted to commander of a machine-gun company two months later.²² When the Brigade needed a new commander on June 12th, 1937, Law was the favorite, as Steve Nelson, one of three white officers of a committee in the Brigade that voted Law as commander, recalled:²³

...more serious than jovial, but never harsh; he was well liked by his men... When soldiers were asked who might become an officer—ours was a very democratic army—his name always came up.²⁴

Unfortunately, after less than a month, Law died leading an attack on Mosquito Ridge in the Battle of Brunete.²⁵ Law’s command challenged deeply entrenched racial norms and

²⁰ Katz, William L. "June 12, 1937: Oliver Law Became Brigade Commander." Zinn Education Project. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/law-oliver/>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Law, Oliver." The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://alba-valb.org/volunteers/oliver-law/>.

²³ Katz, William L. "June 12, 1937: Oliver Law Became Brigade Commander." Zinn Education Project. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/law-oliver/>.

²⁴ Katz, William L., and Marc Crawford. *The Lincoln Brigade: A Picture History*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013, 33.

²⁵ "American, Battalion Head, Killed," 13; Katz, William L., and Marc Crawford. *The Lincoln Brigade: A Picture History*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013, 34.

showcased the potential for a desegregated military unit and integrated leadership. His role in the Brigade symbolized a significant step toward racial integration in the military, foreshadowing the eventual desegregation of the U.S. armed forces in 1948.²⁶ His leadership, enabled by the Brigade, provided a powerful counter-narrative to the pervasive racism of the 1930s and would inspire Black Americans to seek more significant roles in the fight for civil rights. As Nelson, who was the successor of Law's position, eulogized, "Someday, the working class of America will properly acknowledge the role this brave Negro Communist played in the fight for freedom."²⁷

Conclusion

In short, the participation of Black American volunteers in the Brigade during the Spanish Civil War represented a significant step forward in expanding American democracy and civil rights. These soldiers put their lives on the line for causes greater than any one nation as they defied entrenched systems of racism at home to fight against fascist oppression in Spain. Their courage flowed from a conviction that fascist ideologies of racial hatred and authoritarian subjugation were universal ills to be destroyed wherever they took root. Contemporary voices like Langston Hughes amplified this message, ensuring the Black American contribution would not be obscured. Hughes' works vividly parallel Francoist fascism with America's systemic racism. The unprecedented racial integration of units within the Brigade, with elected Black Americans commanding white troops in an age of segregation, challenged Jim Crow's dehumanizing doctrine of white supremacy. The all-too-often unsung sacrifices of the Brigade's

²⁶ Ray, Michael. "Executive Order 9981." Britannica. Last modified October 12, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Executive-Order-9981>.

²⁷ Yates, James. *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Seattle, Wash.: Open Hand Pub., 1989, 138.

Black soldiers affirmed the indivisibility of the fights for democracy abroad and civil rights at home. Though the Brigade's parent cause was extinguished by 1939, the efforts of its Black American contingent proved democracy's universality could transcend national boundaries. Therefore, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade's Black Americans demonstrated that American democracy's promises could potentially be fulfilled through a multicultural, egalitarian pursuit of justice, one as inspiring in Spain as it was imperative at home.

Appendix A



DECORATION
BY BONNELI

"Addressed to Alabama"

by LANGSTON HUGHES

"Dear Folks at Home"

Lincoln Battalion,
International Brigades,
November, 1937.

Dear Folks at home:

I went out this mornin',
Old shells was a-fallin',
Whistlin' and a-fallin',
When I went out this mornin'.

I'm way over here
A long ways from home,
Over here in Spanish country,
But I don't feel alone.

Folks over here don't treat me
Like white bosses used to do—
Cause when I was home they treated me
Just like they treatin' you.

But I don't think things'll ever
Be like that again—
I done met up with folks
Who'll fight for me
Like I'm fightin' now
For Spain!

Salud,
JOHNNY.

"Love Letter From Spain"

Lincoln Battalion,
International Brigades,
Old cold rainy day, 1937.

Sweetie, listen:

I'm writin' this
In a front-line trench
Somewhere in Spain.
I'm sittin' in a dugout
Out of the mud and rain.

I can hear the bullets whinin'.
Sometimes I hear 'em crack.
But if they hit our dugout
They just smack a sandy sack.

I'm thinkin' about you, baby,
Way down in Alabama.
Are you thinkin' about me, honey,
Over here where I am?

I hope you're thinkin', sugar,
And I want you to know
That I'm crazy about you, baby.
No matter where I go.

Just now I'm goin'
To take a Fascist town.
Fascists is Jim Crow peoples, honey—
And here we shoot 'em down.

Honey, you know I loves you!
Honey, you be treat!
When I get through in Spain, babe,
I'll be back to you.

Salud,
JOHNNY.

"Dear Brother at Home"

Lincoln Battalion,
International Brigades,
December, 1937.

Dear Brother at home:

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

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

And made him join the fascist army
And come across to Spain.
And he said he had a feelin'
He'd never get back home again.

He said he had a feelin'
This whole thing wasn't right.
He said he didn't know
The folks he had to fight.

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

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

I said, I guess that's why old England
And I reckon Italy, too,
Is afraid to let a workers' Spain
Be good to me and you—

Cause they got slaves in Africa—
And they don't want 'em to be free.
Listen, Moorish prisoner, hell!
Here, shake hands with me!

I knelt down there beside him.
And I took his hand—
But the wounded Moor was dyin'
And he didn't understand.

Salud,
JOHNNY.



Appendix B

PREFACE: 1936–1975

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experienced during one year (1938) as a soldier in the American battalion of the Brigades.

The battalion's name—Abraham Lincoln—was not chosen idly, for Lincoln represented to us all that aspect of the American democratic tradition that will live forever and forever honor the name of the United States: the struggle against human slavery, against exploitation of the poor by the rich, the fight for decency and human progress against those forces that would hold all peoples back from the achievement of their great potential.

It is therefore a matter of considerable shame and horror to this particular American that as these words are written, the forces of retrogression in the world today still parade under the Stars and Stripes and have found their most beastly expression under our last four administrations: in Korea and the Bay of Pigs, in Santo Domingo and Chile and Vietnam, and in too many other places on the surface of our earth.

We Americans who fought in Spain have been called "premature antifascists" and Spain has been called a lost cause. Premature antifascists have been honored in every nation that fought the Axis—except our own—but we do not seek honors and we have never believed in lost causes.

We know that the opposition of our people can and has forced changes in the policies of our leaders, even though it did not do so during the Spanish war itself. It did force Lyndon Johnson out of office; it did force Richard Nixon to campaign on a promise to end the Vietnam obscenity (just as Johnson had promised before him) and it neutralized and forced Nixon out of office as the depths of his own corruption, arrogance and cynicism became known.

Our people and the entire world have changed greatly since February 1939 when Franco, following his Moorish troops at a safe distance, entered a betrayed Madrid that had never been

cruited independently by dozens of political parties and trade unions had done a beautiful job of failing to coöperate with each other—while demonstrating determination and heroism that will be remembered so long as there are men to whom the defense of democracy is more than a hackneyed phrase. But now the People's Army was under a unified command and many of the earliest idealisms had been laid aside. It was required now that a soldier salute his superior officer—the first flush of equalitarianism had seen in this a degrading gesture. It was understood that soldiers would obey their officers' commands in action; question them later. And therein lies the distinction that made this army unique in military history. For while certain manifestations of individualism had to be restrained in the interest of unified action, every soldier retained the right to question his command, his officers and commissars, and to bring his grievance to the attention of his fellow soldiers and his superiors. This was done in an organized and democratic fashion through the medium of the political meeting, for this was a political army first to last.

We were not an army of automatons under the absolute authority of an unquestionable command. We were an army of responsible, thinking men. We elected our political delegates—an officer who does not exist in any of the finance-controlled armies of the so-called democracies. This political delegate, known as a commissar, was responsible to us. Meetings were called at his, or our, request, where every problem of discipline, of food, clothing, shelter, military orders, mail, tobacco (or largely the absence thereof), tactics and personal behavior was thrashed out. The majority opinion ruled; it was the commissar's obligation to see that abuses

Appendix C



Commander Oliver Law became the first Afro-American in history to lead an integrated U.S. army. He died at Brunete, leading his men into battle.

man who had served six years in the segregated U.S. Army's Twenty-fourth Infantry and could not rise above the rank of sergeant because he was black now led the Americans in Spain. Nelson recalled Law as six foot two and powerfully built,

... more serious than jovial, but never harsh; he was well liked by his men. . . . When soldiers were asked who might become an officer—ours was a very democratic army—his name always came up. It was spoken of him that he was calm under fire, dignified, respectful of his men, and always given to thoughtful consideration of initiatives and military missions.

"Because he had the most experience and was best suited for the job," said Nelson, he was made commander. Not until the Korean War did the U.S. Army break this racial barrier.

The battles at Jarama had saved the Madrid-

Valencia road, but Madrid remained surrounded by rebels on three sides. To prepare to launch its first offensive to push back the rebels, Spain began to shape a regular army, with a unified command, out of its voluntary citizen militias—a bricklayers' section here, a bakers' union unit there.

By March, when an Italian army at Guadalajara attempted to complete the encirclement of Madrid, it was defeated with the help of "the Garibaldis," the Italians in the International Brigade. Mussolini had denied his army was in Spain, but now three hundred captured Italian troops and officers proved that they were.

As the Madrid front quieted down, rebel forces turned their attention to the Basque region in the north. There, Spain's Catholics were fervent in their religion and in support of the republic. On April 26, 1937, Nazi Condor Legion bombers, in Europe's first terror bombing, pulverized the picturesque holy city of Guer-

Appendix D

Mississippi to Madrid

Oliver Law was buried at the front, below Mosquito Ridge, his grave marked only with a post that had his helmet attached to it. On his helmet they wrote his name and age, thirty-four years old. Steve Nelson, who had assumed command of the Brigade, composed Oliver's eulogy: "Someday, the working class of America will properly acknowledge the role this brave Negro Communist played in the fight for freedom."

The following day I was back at the front. I had unloaded food from my truck into the baskets on the backs of the donkeys. Then, all at once, all hell broke out. The poor animals screamed. I looked up and saw wave after wave of bombers and fighters coming through the sky toward us. There were so many of them that they blotted out the sun. Everybody scattered. Once the road was cleared of donkey carts, I headed toward the scorched field which led to the main road. I spotted a few men scrambling beneath a doorway under a grass mound, jumped out of the truck, and entered behind them. There underground was an area large enough to conceal large artillery guns. A tall man with a black moustache demanded, "Whose bloody truck is that up there?" I knew from his speech that he was an Englishman.

"Sir?"

"That your bloody truck? Well I'm sorry, ol' chap, but you'll simply have to move it. It's drawing fire."

"Sorry."

I climbed outside. Although the whole area was almost as black as night, I'd been given an order. My truck was attracting enemy fire.

The earth bounced under my rubbery legs like the deck of the ship that had brought me across the Atlantic. Each bomb tore open a new hole. Mounds of earth and white-hot shrapnel flew about me. Suddenly I felt a sudden stinging in my legs, but with so much happening I didn't think any more about it. At moments the entire world

Yates, James. *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Seattle, Wash.: Open Hand Pub., 1989, 138.

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