Sacrifice and Commitment: American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War

Anders Greenspan
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Email: kuag2013@tamuk.edu

ABSTRACT

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was the last European war before the start of World War II. The war, an ideological struggle between Francisco Franco and his nationalist supporters, aided by the Germans and Italians, sought to remove from power the Spanish Republic, which was aided by the Soviet Union. On both sides of the conflict were volunteers from many countries, including the United States of America. American volunteers fought on both sides of the war, yet more chose the side of the Republicans. Many, but not all, were motivated by political beliefs. Others wanted the perceived romance and excitement of battle, or the sense that they were being of help. The volunteers discussed in this study came from all of these categories, with the ones having political motivation the largest group. They detailed their experiences and their views of the war to their friends, families and comrades back home in the United States. These letters, which come from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives at New York University, form the main part of the study and provide a deeper insight into what these men and women were thinking, as well as providing insight into their desire to fight in Spain. Through their eyes it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and their motivations. For many of them, their experiences in Spain formed an important part of their journey in life. Some of them remained loyal to the Communist ideology throughout their lives, while others changed their views as the ruthlessness of Stalin became better known. A modern audience can benefit from a chance to read their thoughts and ideas in an attempt to better understand the events that helped drive the world into the Second World War.

Key Words: Volunteers, Fascism, War, Ideology, Letter

The decade of the 1930s in the United States was a period of economic turmoil and dramatic social change. Many younger people sought to better understand their country and the world during this decade, and as some Americans began to question capitalism in the wake of the collapse of the global financial system, younger citizens sometimes looked to left-wing political ideals as a way to solve the nation's and the world's economic struggles (Carroll 1994). While many who were attracted to left-wing politics were working class, middle and upper class Americans also flirted with Marxist ideology. For a small number of these Americans, the Spanish Civil War was an important turning point in their lives (Carroll 1994). In retrospect, the war has taken on a much greater importance than it did in the 1930s. What seemed to many Americans as an obscure issue in a country that was far away from their lives and experiences, turned out to be the preparation for the greatest war the world has ever known.

The Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939 was arguably the last chance to stop the progression of events that eventually led to the major conflagration of World War II. Yet many western democratic nations which potentially had the opportunity to halt the spread of fascism in the mid-1930s failed to do so. The drawback that existed for these nations was that the duly elected Spanish Popular Front government which came to power in 1936 was left wing in orientation and supported by the Soviet Union. The result was that when right-wing forces amassed against the government, only the Soviet Union came to its aid. While ostensibly Joseph Stalin was a strong supporter of the anti-fascist cause in Spain, recent scholarship has demonstrated that Stalin's support for the Republic was not as complete as scholars had previously believed, as he swindled the Republic out of millions of dollars in arms deals to gain access to Spanish gold reserves. (Rodash et al 2001). The war was also the first major European conflict which was solely dominated by political ideology, as propaganda suffused both the Republican forces, and the fascist Nationalist forces of Francisco Franco, who was aided by the fascist dictatorships in Germany and Italy. For the Republicans, the war was about the preservation of democracy and the rights of ordinary citizens, while for the Nationalist forces, it was an attempt to oust a regime which they saw as treasonous and incompetent (Esenwein 1999; Howson 1998; Beevor 2006).

For Americans who feared the growth of fascism, the Spanish Civil War became their fight as well. For these individuals, the war symbolized the fight of good against evil, of democracy against tyranny. These young men and women were more politically attuned than most Americans. They also feared the growing power of fascism and its potential threat to their own lives and security. In some cases based on their own initiative, and in many others after recruitment by Communist organizations in the United States, these volunteers made their way to Spain, often in hazardous conditions, to fight on the Republican side. The majority of those who chose to serve were from working class backgrounds, many of them were sailors, shipyard workers, industrial laborers and miners. A smaller number were middle class and others were students. These volunteers were not only concerned for the political future of Spain, but the rest of the world as well (Carroll 1994). Yet many of their family members remained isolationist and greeted international intervention with serious skepticism. This led some volunteers to hide their participation in the war from their families.

Letters both to and from the United States served as an important means of maintaining morale and demonstrating to those at home the necessity of the cause. For the 2,800 Americans who served as volunteers on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, the correspondence to their family, friends and comrades back in the United States reveals an important part of their experience during the war. These letters served a variety of purposes. To some, they were a means of informing loved ones back home that they were okay. To others, they served as a propaganda tool to promote the cause of the Republican forces against the fascists. In some cases they were a combination of the two. Yet whatever their genesis, these letters form an important part of our understanding of the experiences of the men and women who volunteered for duty in Spain, while at the same time serving as a way to challenge American isolationism in the 1930s. Many, but not all volunteers, had ties to the Communist Party. Others saw the war in Spain as a great adventure. In some cases, especially for the young women who served as nurses, they desired to be of help.

In some cases, volunteers lied to their friends and families about their true destination when they went overseas. This was especially true if these people were not supportive of the Republican cause. In some cases this was perhaps to protect themselves, since it was illegal for Americans to travel to Spain in this period; in other cases it may simply have been to cover up their actions, since they felt that those at home would not approve (Fisher 1998). In addition, many Americans remained uncertain about support for the Popular Front, since they were allied with the Soviet Union. The result was a complicated relationship between those who supported the Republican cause, and their friends, families and colleagues at home whose view on the war ranged from total support to outright opposition. Much of this feeling was tied to the notion that events overseas did not have an impact on what was going on at home. Indeed, many Americans still had isolationist feelings which were left over from the First World War. As a result, going off to fight in a distant country for a foreign government seemed like a strange way to express one's support for the United States. Yet, many of those serving in Spain did see their participation as part of a higher purpose, especially since they believed that they were working to prevent another world war (Carroll 1994; Fisher 1998).

One American who ventured overseas with the intention of going to Spain, but was reluctant to reveal his true destination was Ted Cogswell, from Cleveland, Ohio. Cogswell, like many other volunteers, originally told his family that he would be going to France, which served as the embarkation point for those hoping to slip into Spain to fight for the loyalists. In one letter, Cogswell wrote to his family telling them of his true destination in Europe, "I really havent [sic] been in France all this time but in Spain" (ALBA, Collection 20, Folder SCW His). He related that he had trained as a signalman in a machine gun company and expected to go to the front. "They found out my age, however, just a short time before the outfit was due to leave . . . [i]t seems there is a strict ruling that no one may go to the front who is under 21" (ALBA, Col. 20, Fol. SCW His). Later Cogswell was given a job in a transport unit, and he reported "I have a job of local hauling. It's all very romantic." (ALBA, Col. 20, Fol. SCW His).

Common, as well, were sentiments about politics and the important events that were being played out in Spain. In describing his comrades, Cogswell commonly referred to their common idealism and their beliefs in the dangers of fascism: "Hundreds of them from all walks of life, from all states in the union, with all shades of political opinion, bound together with a common hatred of fascism and a common love of democracy" (ALBA Col. 20, Fol. SCW His). He commented, "In my outfit are English . . . French, Germans and Poles and most of the other races. Grand fellows all of them. One of my best friends was in a German

concentration camp since 1933. He escaped and came here. Some of the things he told me are too horrible to write. The people are treated like beasts**"** (ALBA Col. 20, Fol. SCW His). Cogswell was introduced on a wide scale to both Americans and Europeans who were there to fight fascism, even some who had endured its rigors first hand. There is no doubt that there was a strong anti-fascist influence of those who were members of the Communist Party, as fascism was seen as a direct challenge to Marxist ideology, but certainly not all of those who volunteered were Communists. While Cogswell was not a Communist, he saw the broader political issues of the war in Spain perhaps a bit more clearly than most young Americans at the time, many of whom may well have adopted their parents' isolationist views.

Cogswell's actions were also recorded in his hometown paper. The *Dayton Journal* in January 1938 wrote of his actions: **"**The boy is Ted Cogswell, formerly of Dayton, whose family are now residents of Cleveland. Last summer he went to Spain and joined the government forces to find out for himself what the war was all about.**"** The article went on to indicate that **"**at present Ted is driving an ambulance under the flag of the Red Cross.**"** The paper took a rather sympathetic view of the fighting in Spain, writing that "the international brigades are composed of soldiers of all countries. . . they are the best of their countries. Germans and Italians [in the international brigades] fight side by side, knowing that once Fascism is defeated here, but a short time will pass before their homelands will again be free**"** (*Dayton Journal* 1938).

Another volunteer who also had divisions with his family was Joe Dallett. Dallett, however, was a Communist who had joined the party in 1929. Dallett also tried to assure them that he was "doing what I believe in, want to do, do best, and MOST ENJOY DOING [emphasis original]" (ALBA Col. 32, Box 1, Fol. 1.83). Much of this skepticism probably came from the fact that Dallett was from a well-off family, and his actions appeared to be running directly counter to his socio-economic background. As Dallett was quick to point out to his mother, he was in no way coerced to go and join the fight in Spain. Indeed, he was twice refused permission to go by the Party, until they finally relented and granted him leave to go (Carroll, 1994). While devoted to the Communist ideal, Dallett, who served as the political officer (commissar) for the Canadian MacKenzie-Papineau Brigade, was very unpopular with his men, who found him to be overbearing and a harsh disciplinarian. He complained of being stuck behind the lines, forced to perform administrative duties. Given the chance to perform on the battlefield, Dallett was shot twice and died on October 17, 1937 at the Battle of Saragossa (Carroll 1994).

While support of the Communist Party, and therefore support of loyalist Spain, was perhaps easier to understand among working-class individuals, these people were not necessarily any more supportive of the Republican government than those from more prosperous backgrounds. One individual from a more traditional background who went to fight in Spain was Harry Fisher. Fisher was from a working-class family in New York, and his letters are among the most detailed writings of those which survived the war. Fisher commonly related the intensity of feeling of both the volunteers and the Spanish soldiers who fought on the side of the Republic. In March 1937 he wrote to his sister and brother-in-law Sal and Hy Lieber that "the spirit of the Spanish workers is great. It will be hard to lick them with this spirit. These workers know what they are fighting for. The fascists are fighting because they are forced to" (ALBA Col. 39, Box 1).

For Fisher the fight for the defeat of fascism in Spain was part of a broader promotion of the aims of the Soviet Union. He described the Spanish peasants' affection for the Soviet Union: "Their [the peasants'] eyes actually gleam when you talk about Russia. America . . . isn't the country of hope to them anymore today it's Russia and rightfully so" (ALBA Col. 39 Box 1). In Fisher's case the war also pointed out the importance of the ideological struggle and the notion that it was more important than certain luxuries. As he wrote to the Liebers, " If you ever saw the two little children in bandages wounded by the fascist bombs . . . then beds and fine foods and pretty girls would seem insignificant as they do to me" (ALBA Col. 39, Box 1).

Fisher also detailed the role that propaganda played in the war, as both sides viewed their causes as ideological as well as military. He wrote to the Liebers that "in this section of the front, the war seems to be developing into a war of propaganda." He continued, "we've been showering the fascists with leaflets for some time now and it has been very effective since many rebels have been coming over here to us." The fascists also used propaganda to promote their war aims. As Fisher remarked, "yesterday morning at about five, some fascist planes appeared over our lines . . . and dropped leaflets. The leaflets said that if we of the I.B. would come over to their side they would have us sent to our native countries. The paper was very soft and effective as toilet paper" (ALBA Col. 39, Box 1).

While Fisher was honest with his friends the Liebers as to where he was, he was lying to his mother about his real destination in Europe. Since the mail for the volunteers was transported by land to France and mailed from there, Fisher, and other volunteers as well, were able to fool their families, at least for a while, as to their true whereabouts. Two days after writing to the Liebers that "bullets whistle over our heads, trench mortars fall around," he wrote to his mother "I like the weather and food in France a lot. I put on about ten pounds. I'm even learning how to speak French" Ten days letter he wrote his mother again "I'm still working in France. The work is pleasant and easy. I work in the basement of a department store . . . I work only about forty hours a week" (ALBA Col. 39, Box 1).

Fisher's deception highlighted the difficulty of telling family members that one was volunteering for service in Spain. Parents, especially, were wary of the dangers of their children being placed in combat situations. Even those whose who strongly supported left-wing politics could find it difficult to understand why one would want to volunteer for such dangerous duty and for a fight that seemed to remote from the United States. By the fall of 1937, Fisher's mother had deduced the truth about her son's whereabouts. In September 1937 Fisher wrote his mother that "I have been taken out of the lines with the rest of the Lincoln fellows from the Jamara days since there are enough fresh comrades in reserve to take our place" (ALBA Col. 39, Box 1).

This failed deception was often the case, since while volunteers might not have always been up front with their friends and relatives about their intended destination, some event or news story tipped these individuals off to the volunteers' true destination. Often the volunteer tried to explain his or her motivation for taking such a step. As Carl Geiser wrote to his brother Bennet in May 1937 from Albacete, Spain, "the reasons I am here [are] because I want to do my share to prevent a second world war . . . and secondly, because all of our democratic and liberty-loving training makes me anxious to fight fascism, and to help the Spanish people drive out the fascist invaders sent in by Hitler and Mussolini" (ALBA Col. 40). Geiser saw the conflict in Spain as a clear battle between fascism and democracy, that if not concluded in Spain, would potentially spread. As he reminded his brother, "last July 16 an uprising . . . began against the democratic legally elected Republican government of Spain. It was organized and financed by Hitler and Mussolini . . . The uprising would have been squelched within a short time, if Hitler and Mussolini had not sent in tanks, airplanes, weapons and more" (ALBA Col. 40). Thus the victory and Hitler and Mussolini would, in Geiser's view, strengthen fascism and threaten democracy worldwide. As he continued, "Everyone who wants democracy and peace must help the Spanish government . . . the fight here is between democracy and fascism, and not between communism and fascism or democracy" (ALBA Col. 40).

Geiser was, apparently, unable to convince his brother of the possible international repercussions of a fascist victory in Spain. As he commented in a letter to a friend identified only as Impy "I received a letter from Bennet . . . he says the whole idea of my being here to prevent a world war is ridiculous, that the U.S. must have nothing to do with either side" (ALBA Col. 40). In his reply to his brother, dated June 27, 1937, Geiser detailed his feelings about the possibility of a second world war: "When the communists, and they were the only ones, said in 1927 and 28 that another depression was coming, every one else called them ridiculous. Now we say that Italy and Germany are preparing for war . . . and if the rest of the world doesn't stop them, we will have a second world war" (ALBA Col. 40).

Yet the volunteers were not always correct in their prognostications. While they were right about the upcoming world war, they were less so when it came to the future of the Spanish Republic. Letters back to the states are almost all full of strong sentiments predicting victory for the loyalists, although as the war dragged on, and Franco's victories mounted, it became harder to be optimistic. Yet in the summer in 1936 hopes were high for an early victory. As *Daily Worker* correspondent Marion Greenspan wrote to his wife that first summer of the war, "if anybody suggests that the Fascists might take Madrid, laugh at them" (ALBA Col. 45). But the attack on Madrid was in full swing by the spring of 1937, and Greenspan had to report that "Madrid was shelled heavily in the center these past days" (ALBA Col. 45).

Greenspan's case also illuminated the situation of couples who were separated as a result of the war. His wife Celia was serving at a hospital in Murcia, and while she wanted to go see her husband in Madrid, she wondered, "what kind of a comrade would I be if I walked out [?] If I had a transfer to a job in Madrid there would at least be some excuse. But here, with a dozen examples of couples broken up by the needs of the war, to leave in order to be with you would be to say that we and our personal happiness come first" (ALBA Col. 45). The war also gave Celia Greenspan a stronger sense of her relationship to the greater political

cause that the volunteers were fighting for. As she wrote her husband in June 1937, "the war has changed me . . . all the books and all the lectures and all the unit meetings in the world . . . couldn't have given me the feeling of personal responsibility to the movement, as being here, working and watching have done" (ALBA Col. 45).

The war also attracted non-party members lured perhaps by the glamour of the fight. One of the last young men to volunteer, and among the last to be killed, was James Lardner, son of the author Ring Lardner. Lardner first went to Spain as a journalist and then later decided to enlist. As he wrote his mother in February 1938, "there is still another chance . . . of my going to Spain to do a series of pieces on the Americans in the International Brigades. This would be for a magazine appearance first and then for publication as a book" (ALBA Col. 67, Fol. 2). A little over a month later, Lardner had received the backing of three news agencies and went to Spain as the accredited correspondent of the Copenhagen *Politiken*, the New York *Herald Tribune*, and the International News Service. By May 1938, however, Lardner had decided to join the loyalist forces. As he wrote to his mother, "I still don't know what the situation is, but I am leaving in half an hour for Badalona . . . where I will learn the rudiments of artillery in company with a new mixed international unit" (ALBA Col. 67, Fol. 6). He indicated that he had consulted a number of people and "listened to advice of all varieties, a large part of it against my enlisting at all . . . Ernest Hemingway's advice was that it was a very fine thing if I wanted to fight against fascism, but that it was a personal matter that could only be decided by me" (ALBA Col. 67, Fol. 6).

His mother did not support Lardner's view of the Republican cause, as he wrote to her in June 1938 saying, "in writing to me it is better not to say that you want me to try to come home. I know you do and always will, but it is liable to get letters stopped if you write it" (ALBA Col. 67, Fol. 10). Convinced of the correctness of his actions, Lardner seemed to be certain that he would return, commenting, "I don't mean to be cruel. But it is better that you should resign yourself to my being in Spain indefinitely. A good soldier is hard to hit and I am going to be a good soldier" (ALBA Col. 67, Fol. 10). Tied to her wish to bring Lardner home, was also his mother's apparent distrust of Communism and Communists. Yet Lardner tried to convince his mother that her views on Communism were unsound. He wrote, "The communists are working everywhere, as openly as any party in the world, to win the people to their way of thinking by peaceful organized methods[,] . . . characterizations of communists as dirty bomb throw[ers] . . . are ridiculous" (ALBA Col. 67, Fol. 14).

Even though it was clear that there were family divisions over Lardner's decision to fight for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, he had made up his mind that this was his future and as he wrote in one of his last letters, "I have a very good idea of what I am going to do with my life. Some of the details may not work out, but I shall work hard to a definite end, and I guess there is nothing better than that" (ALBA Col. 67, Fol. 21). Because Lardner came from a prominent family it was not easy for him to be readily accepted by the men he served with, especially since many of them came from working-class backgrounds. At first, his tendency to be polite and put himself at the end of the food line alienated him from the other men, who found his behavior odd. Later, though, he learned to curse and push toward the front of the line, which helped him to gain acceptance (Fisher 1998).

Vincent Lossowski expressed quite common sentiments when he wrote to his mother and sister regarding his reasons for going to Spain. He commented, "I am not doing this thing out of the desire so foolish of a romantic adventure, but with a sound determination to do my little bit" (ALBA Col. 71). He went on to tell his mother that nobody convinced him to come, rather it was through his own inclination that he came across. He believed that similar changes were in store in Spain as those which occurred in the Soviet Union. He wrote to his family in October 1937 that "in a country of people where almost 50% of the population can't either read or write the government is building modern schools which adults may attend, and the attendance is remarkable" (ALBA Col. 71). Lassowski was particularly moved by the ideals of the Spanish government and the desire of the Spanish people for advancement. He saw the war in Spain as part of a worldwide struggle against fascism. As he commented to his sister, Wanda, in December 1937, the volunteers who were in Spain were "men who left good paying jobs, love, everything that makes life comfortable giving all this up to come to Spain writing their efforts in blood that fascism shall not pass" (ALBA Col. 71). He expressed similar sentiments to his sister the following March following the seizure of Austria by Hitler: "if only you knew how proud it makes me feel to be an officer of an army that is composed of some of the best of the working class that is now struggling to stem the tide of fascism" (ALBA Col. 71).

Irving Weissman had to deal with the lack of support from his parents when he decided to make the trip to go to fight in Spain. As he wrote to his sister, Sara, "how one's life does fuse with the moment! One lives so many lives in a single lifetime [but] . . .what hurts is that I don't have the support of momma and poppa. If only they could see, I feel in a very real sense that I am fighting for them that lives like theirs should no longer be stunted" (ALBA Col. 165, Fol. SCW Correspondence). He wrote later to his parents in an attempt to clarify why he was fighting in Spain "It may be hard for you to understand but over here in Spain some of us, I won't say all, some of us are happier than ever before in our lives. The reason for this is that we are living according to our beliefs. The fact that we are in Spain shows that we have not paid only lip service to the workers' movement" (ALBA Col. 165, Fol. SCW Corres.). Weissman had some fairly harsh words for his comrades, who were pushing him to return to the States. As he wrote to a friend only identified as Shnooks, "forget all about this homecoming business until the war is over. Stop those efforts. And condemn the comrades for the kind of letters they've been writing. We are building a new type of democracy and it is being born in agony" (ALBA Col. 165, Fol. SCW Corres.). For Weissman, his comrades were apparently not strong enough in their conviction of the importance of the war, or in the understanding of the broader principles that came along with it. He informed them of the importance of outside support for those fighting for the Republican cause in Spain, writing, "the political significance of the aid of the English speaking nations to Spanish democracy cannot be overestimated" (ALBA Col. 165, Fol. SCW Corres.). In addition, he emphasized that there was no separation between the personal and political life in Spain.

Frank Costanzo had to deal with his wife and her feelings of being hurt when he left her to go to fight in Spain. Yet he felt that serving in the International Brigades was a duty that he needed to fulfill. In order to console her, he wrote her in December 1937, saying, "I feel bad because I have hurt you. At the same time I have to say that I am not sorry that I came to Spain and I hope you can understand that it is part of my duty to be here. Some day you will be able to see this and understand it" (ALBA Col. 195).

For many veterans, even after the war ended, its lessons were still an important part of world history. Just as many of those who fought in Spain had predicted, the failure to stop Germany and Italy in Spain would have dire consequences in the years to come. To many veterans, it had became clear by the fall of 1941 that the United States would need to enter the war in order to assure a fascist defeat. Yet the Neutrality Acts prohibited the United States from declaring war without an overt attack or a similar declaration. In the end, the many volunteers who predicted to their friends and relations that another world war was imminent were right B more so than they could have possibly imagined. And while the ultimate defeat of European fascism did occur, the heavy price that needed to be paid for this defeat, and the millions of innocent civilians who died, provided little consolation. In the years following World War II, many of the veterans would be persecuted for their experiences in Spain, in some cases losing their jobs and even landing in jail.

For most of those who served, the Spanish Civil War represented a unique moment in time: a period when the forces of Hitler and Mussolini, while growing, had not yet reached the strength that they would have by the Second World War. While most of these participants were able to see the possibility of the spread of fascism and the strong probability of a second world war, the large western powers, namely the United States, Britain and France feared aiding the Spanish Republican government because of its ties to Moscow. While fascism might have seemed to be a danger, the greater fear for many of these countries and their leaders was the repercussions of a tacit support of communism, which might encourage its spread through the world. These volunteers with their leftist sympathies of course had no such concern.

In the 1930s, as many volunteers related in their letters home, they saw Communism as a benign institution aimed at supporting the rights of the working class and working to improve their living conditions. They were attempting in many ways to combine American and Communist ideals in the support of a duly elected left-wing government. This goal may appear naive to a modern audience, but at the time, the excesses of Stalinism were not generally known in the west. Certainly in Spain, the potential victory of Franco and his German and Italian fascist allies seemed a much worse alternative. While ultimately the American volunteers did not achieve their goals of stopping the rise of fascism in Spain, through the letters they sent home they did awaken in their friends and families a better understanding of world events and the inherent problems of isolationism.

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