

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade:  
The First Desegregated American Fighting Force

Iago Macknik-Conde  
Senior Division  
Individual Performance  
Process Paper: 500 words

I first became interested in the Spanish Civil War when I learned that my great-grandfather was arrested by Franco's police and sentenced to death (thankfully, he was eventually pardoned). I have visited the town of Guernica, gone to Madrid to see the fighter planes used by the Republic, and even published a fictional story about the war in the *2022 Inklings Anthology*.

I knew about the American volunteers who fought Franco, and that they were called the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, but it was only when I read about the international volunteers fighting in Ukraine that I realized history was echoing itself.

The Lincoln volunteers were trailblazers. The first desegregated American combat unit, they were the first Americans to go to war against fascism, and they spearheaded the civil rights movement on their return home. They were so far ahead of their time that the US government labeled them "premature antifascists," a title they would wear with pride.

My research included newspapers, documentaries, letters, autobiographies, and various archival materials. Early on, I found an excellent resource in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, an online database that contains extensive information about the Brigade, and which pointed me to the special collection—with original documents from the war—housed in NYU's Tamiment Library.

I started my project by listening to interviews from Lincoln veterans and brainstorming about the best setting for my play. I picked the Battle of the Ebro because that was the Republican forces' last chance for victory. I initially thought I would work on each part of my project sequentially—research, writing, annotations, and rehearsal—but ultimately found that it was better to do it in cycles. I would write a draft, cite the sources, rehearse, rinse, and repeat. I struggled with how to portray a large group of people as an individual performer, and finally

decided to write a play with three characters only: two soldiers in a trench (each based on multiple Lincoln volunteers) and a radio reporter to provide historical context for the battle.

The Abraham Lincoln brigadiers were at the vanguard of the worldwide fight for civil rights that, one could argue, rages on to this day. When Franco, aided by Hitler and Mussolini, rose up against the Spanish Second Republic, he was repelled for three years by the legitimate democratically elected government, armed civilians, and international volunteers from over 50 countries. At its core, the war was waged between the forces of fascism against those of democracy and the common people. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was one of the first to stand up against the fascist tide, and did it while accepting people of all social classes, races, and creeds. One third of the brigadiers died in battle, but the survivors continued to fight for equality in America and around the world. Though the brigadiers did not defeat fascism in Spain, they showed their countrymen that the fight against injustice was a global one, and that anyone could—and should—be a part of it.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

“8 U.S. Citizens Die for Basques.” *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, November 8, 1937. This news article reports the deaths of eight American volunteers on the Aragon front during the Spanish Civil War. While the body of the article presents matter-of-fact information, the title’s word choice deemphasizes the American presence in Spain by obscuring the geographical location of the conflict. Coming across this article helped me understand some of the pro-isolationist views that prevailed in America at the time.

“323 Battle-Scarred Veterans of Lincoln Brigade Back Home: Dozen Brooklynites in Group Welcomed By Big Crowds—Passports Confiscated.” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. December 20, 1938. This article describes the arrival of several hundred veterans to Brooklyn after the International Brigades were withdrawn from the Spanish Civil War in late 1938. I found interesting the contrast between the large crowd that welcomed the veterans and the presence of agents of the State Department who confiscated their passports as soon as they disembarked. This helped me appreciate some of the deep divisions that existed in America at the time.

“Americans Slain in Spain.” *The New York Times*. June 23, 1938. This news article details the deaths of nine members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—also known as the Abraham Lincoln Battalion—in Spain in June of 1938. It showed me that major American newspapers covered the conflict and that their readers were interested in it, even though the United States had no official involvement.

“El Pueblo del 14 de Abril y del 19 de Julio Rindió Ayer Homenaje a las Heroicas Brigadas Internacionales.” *La Vanguardia*, October 29, 1938.

<https://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/1938/10/29/pagina-3/33131951/pdf.html>.

In October of 1938, the International Brigades withdrew from the war in Spain, in hopes that Italy and Germany would likewise call back their troops (this did not happen: Franco continued to receive Italian and German military support until the end of the war). This Spanish newspaper describes the farewell parade by which the city of Barcelona (with some 300,000 people in attendance) honored the International Brigades. Reading this article helped me grasp the difference between how the Abraham Lincoln Brigade members were treated in Spain versus on their return to America.

Eddie Cantor. *(If They Feel Like A War) Let Them Keep It Over There*. CD. *Eddie Cantor Sings His Hits and Rarities*. Original Cast Records, 1936. Allmusic.com.

<https://www.allmusic.com/album/hits-rarities-mw0001529142?1674323812567>. This song, by the American comedian and actor Eddie Cantor (1892-1964), first aired on the radio in 1936. Listening to its lyrics helped me understand the pro-isolationist views held by a good portion of the American public in the 1930s, and their influence on the United States government’s decision to follow a policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War. I play this song at the beginning of my performance, right before the radio reporter starts speaking.

Charlton, L. E. O. “How Spain's Defeat Is Blow at Us.” *Reynolds News*. March 12, 1939. This article, published in a British newspaper shortly after Franco’s defeat of the Second Spanish Republic, asserted that the resulting “military encirclement of Western Europe by Axis powers” would have direct and disastrous consequences on a global scale.

Reading this piece helped me appreciate that the non-intervention agreement ultimately encouraged Nazi Germany's and fascist Italy's expansionist ambitions. It also made me realize that the International Brigades were not alone in their realization that the Spanish Civil War was much more than a local conflict.

Giles, Carl. "FRANCO: Does Anyone Here Understand Spanish?" Cartoon. *Reynolds News*.

London, July 31, 1937. In this political cartoon, a caricature depiction of General Francisco Franco asks his troops, "Does anyone here understand Spanish?" The implication is that many of the soldiers fighting for Franco were German and Italian, rather than Spanish. This cartoon helped me understand that, despite the non-intervention agreement, it was widely known outside of Spain that Italy and Germany were actively helping Franco's rebellion against the democratically elected government.

Hemingway, Ernest. "Hemingway Reports Spain." *The New Republic*, April 27, 1938. I had read previously some of Hemingway's fiction that was inspired by the Spanish Civil War, but this was the first time that I read his writing as a war correspondent during the conflict. Hemingway's vivid depictions of an air raid on the Catalonian city of Reus, and of the civilian refugees escaping the bombing, helped me envision what it must have been like during that time, and it also made reflect on the long-lasting cultural impact of writers and artists who were moved by Spain's struggle against fascism.

Ibárruri, Dolores, and Allan Christiansen. "*Dolores Ibarurri's ('La Pasionaria') Farewell Address to the International Brigades.*" Spanish Civil War and the Seafarers and Dockers, June 16, 2019. <http://spanishsky.dk/la-pasionaria-farewell-address/>. Dolores Ibárruri (1895-1989), known as *la Pasionaria*, was a Spanish politician and activist, who introduced the slogan *No Pasarán* (They Shall Not Pass) during the Battle of Madrid.

Ibárruri's farewell speech to the International Brigades helped me understand the groundbreaking scope of the international volunteers' efforts to save democracy in a country threatened by a fascist rebellion. Ibárruri's speech inspired the last portion of the broadcast at the end of my play.

Katz, Nelson, Cary, Ed. *The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems about the Spanish Civil War*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002. The legacy of the Spanish Civil War was both cultural and geopolitical. This anthology of poems, written by Americans about the Spanish Civil War, helped me understand the Abraham Lincoln brigadiers' emotional ties to the war in Spain.

Kaufman, Dan. "The Last Volunteer." *The New York Times*, March 12, 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/magazine/the-last-volunteer.html?ref=magazine&mtrref=undefined&r=0>. This is a first-person account by Delmer Berg, the last surviving member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, about his involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Berg died one year after the publication of this article. I used Berg's story as partial inspiration for John's character, as a young idealistic member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who was not affiliated with communism but wanted to help the Spanish people.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Bantam Dell, a division of Random House, Inc., 2004. This book was written to educate people on the economic theory underlying the philosophy of communism. Reading the Communist Manifesto helped me understand what motivated communist members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to join the fight in Spain.

Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. Bexar County, Texas: BiblioTech Press, 2018. Orwell wrote this memoir about his experiences fighting in Spain alongside Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War. Though Orwell fought in an anarchist militia in Catalonia rather than in the International Brigades, I found his perspective compelling as an example of the motivations of a socialist fighting in Spain as a foreign volunteer. Orwell's account served as partial inspiration for Sergeant William's character in my play.

"Refuses To Give Commission Names of Those Who Furnish Funds for Spanish Loyalists." *The Berkshire County Eagle*, November 3, 1937. This newspaper article, published in 1937, reports that the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade refused to provide a list of their contributors to a special investigative commission, even though they were ordered to do so by the Massachusetts State Supreme Court. This article made me realize that members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were considered suspect and subjected to scrutiny even before the onset of the Cold War.

"*Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade v. Subversive Activities Control Board*." 380 U.S. 513, 1965. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. Accessed December 30, 2022. <https://www.thefire.org/supreme-court/veterans-abraham-lincoln-brigade-v-subversive-activities-control-board>. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was compelled to register as a Communist-front organization under the Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans filed suit against the Subversive Activities Control Board for this decision, fighting a protracted legal battle and finally succeeding in 1965. This Supreme Court case helped me understand the discrimination and prejudice faced by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans in the McCarthy era.



“Studio and Screen: Paul Robeson's Film Plans—A Spanish War Picture—Chopping and Changing.” *The Manchester Guardian*. October 14, 1938. I was surprised to read in this article that, as early as 1938, there were plans to make a movie about Oliver Law, a Black man who served as commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The article also states that the “big companies (...) would not consider it ‘policy’ to depict a Negro leading white men into battle,” and as far as I am aware, the movie was never made. Reading this made me appreciate how remarkable Oliver Law and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were for their time.

“The War in Spain Being Fought Out in Beloit.” *The Janesville Gazette*, September 20, 1937.

This article details the clash between allies of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Beloit school board in Wisconsin, over whether the first group was allowed to hold an event in a school building. *The Janesville Gazette*'s one-sided treatment of the controversy is evidenced by their referring to the Spanish legitimate government as “red Spain” and to the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as “zealot propagandists.” This article provided me with a vivid illustration of the culture war that was waged in America at the time, as well as the lack of support that many brigadiers experienced at home from the outset, and it helped me understand that polarization in American news is not a recent phenomenon.

Wheeler, Bill. “A Death on the Ebro.” *The Volunteer*, 1996.

<https://albavolunteer.org/2015/03/blast-from-the-past-death-on-the-ebro/>. This is a first-person account of the death of David Lipton, an Abraham Lincoln Brigade member who was killed in action in 1930, during the Ebro Offensive. Reading it helped me appreciate

that, for the Abraham Lincoln brigadiers, the war in Spain was not a “civil war,” but a war of intervention by the German and Italian fascist powers in Europe.

“Women in the News.” *The Bee*, January 7, 1938. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade included around 60 women who volunteered as nurses and in other support roles. Nevertheless, I found few mentions of women brigadiers in newspapers of the time. This short note on Marion Merriman, who was married to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade commander Robert Hale Merriman, was one of the exceptions.

Yates, James. *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Open Hand Pub., 1989. I learned about this book by watching the documentary “Invisible Heroes: African Americans in the Spanish Civil War.” Yates asserted that fighting in Spain was the first time, as a black man, in which he felt a free man. Reading Yates’s account helped me understand the experience of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and inspired my portrait of Sergeant William.

### Secondary Sources

*The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives*, <http://alba-valb.org>. I was fortunate to come across the ALBA archives early in my research. In addition to a searchable database of Abraham Lincoln Brigade members and their available biographical information, the ALBA website pointed me to—and contextualized—a wealth of resources, including personal accounts, oral histories, several valuable documentaries, and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives Collection at New York University’s Tamiment Library. The ALBA

archives were crucial to my understanding of the important roles played by women and by Black Americans as members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

*The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives Collection*, Tamiment Library Special Collections, New York University. This extensive collection includes letters, writings, oral histories, photographs, posters, and artifacts from the Lincoln volunteers. I visited the Tamiment library to examine various archival materials, including research files of African Americans in the Spanish Civil War, complaints of discrimination from Lincoln veterans during World War II, and dozens of original recruitment and other propaganda posters from that era. These visits not only informed and expanded my project, but they also helped me conceive and develop my two main characters as composites of the real people who inspired them: especially Oliver Law, Salaria Kea O'Reilly, Delmer Berg, Milton Wolff, and James Yates.

Bradley, Ken. *International Brigades in Spain 1936-39*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 1994.

This book contains information about the combat history, weapons, and gear employed by the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. I used this source to help me visualize the setting of my play and to decide what specific battle to portray. I choose the Battle of the Ebro—the last-ditch effort from the Second Spanish Republic against Franco's rebel army—in which the Abraham Lincoln Brigade suffered devastating losses.

Brooks, Chris. "List of African American Volunteers." *The Volunteer*, March 5, 2021.

<https://albavolunteer.org/2021/03/list-of-african-american-volunteers/>. This is a comprehensive list of the African American volunteers that served in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Seeing this list of names, accompanying biographical information, and available pictures, made an impression on me about the efforts of Black Americans—

from all around the US and from all walks of life—in the fight against fascism during the Spanish Civil War.

Buckner, N., Dore, M., Sills, S, dirs. *The Good Fight, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Film Project*, 1984. <http://www.kino.com>. “The Good Fight” is a documentary recounting the experiences of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade 25 years after the end of the Spanish Civil War. This documentary, which includes many interviews with Lincoln veterans, inspired some of Sergeant William’s dialogue in my play, about how returning to America as a Black man would mean going “back to the bottom” for him. It also helped me understand the unique historical circumstances that made the Abraham Lincoln Brigade the first desegregated American fighting force, and it introduced me to the brigadiers’ commitment to activism and equality before, during, and after the Spanish Civil War, despite facing significant discrimination and prejudice back in the US.

Carroll, Peter N., and James D. Fernandez. *Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War*. New York, New York: New York University Press, 2007. This book, which was recommended to me back in 2020 by one of its authors (Prof. Fernandez of New York University), served as the catalog to an exhibition of the same name that was shown at the Museum of the City of New York in 2007. I was surprised to find out that almost half of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade members came from the New York area. I also learned that a high proportion of the Abraham Lincoln brigadiers were Jewish (a third of all American volunteers and two thirds of those from New York): many Jewish members of the International Brigades joined the conflict for the historical chance to fight together against Hitler and the principles of Nazi Germany.

Carroll, Peter N., Michael Nash, and Melvin Small, eds. *The Good Fight Continues*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006. Many veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade enlisted during World War II, despite being labeled “premature antifascists” by the US military, being blocked from overseas combat assignments and officer commissions, and Black Abraham Lincoln veterans being made to serve in segregated units, usually in lesser roles. This book, which provides the historical context for a collection of letters written by Abraham Lincoln Brigade members during World War II, helped me appreciate their deep commitment to fighting fascism all over the world.

Domingo, A., Torrent, J, *Invisible Heroes: African-Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, Argonauta Producciones SL and Duende Pictures Inc, 2015. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade included close to one hundred Black Americans who played critical roles in the fight (with one Black brigadier, Oliver Law, becoming the Abraham Lincoln Brigade’s commander). This documentary, which includes archival footage and pictures, and interviews with Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans, helped me understand the motivations of Black Americans to join the fight against fascism in Spain, and how serving on the first desegregated American combat unit inspired many Lincoln brigadiers to spearhead the fight for civil rights in America.

Field, Connie, Montell, Judith. dirs. *Forever Activists: Stories from the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Vimeo, 1990. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/foreveractivists>. This documentary, which was nominated for an Academy Award, helped me understand the indefatigable activism of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans in the global fight against fascism, even after the US government revoked their passports and kept them under watch for decades.

Furr, Groverlaw. "Anatomy of a Lie: The Death of Oliver Law." *The Volunteer*, June 1, 2010.

<https://albavolunteer.org/2010/06/anatomy-of-a-lie-the-death-of-oliver-law/>. This article debunks an apocryphal version of Oliver Law's death. It helped me understand the factual circumstances of Law's death in battle while leading a charge against Franco's rebel army on Mosquito Hill (Battle of Brunete) on July 9, 1937.

Geist, Anthony. "The Lincoln Brigade: A Legacy of Racial Justice." *The Volunteer*, June 12,

2014. <https://albavolunteer.org/2014/06/a-legacy-of-racial-justice/>. This article helped me appreciate that Black members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade experienced double discrimination on their return to America: for their race and for their politics. It also helped me understand the role that Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans played in uplifting the civil rights of Black Americans during the Civil Rights movement.

Graham, Helen. *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2005. This book provides an overview of the social, economic, and political forces that led to the Spanish Civil War. It helped me understand the roots of the conflict, the history of the battles, and the choices that were made on each side.

González, Manuel. *La Guerra Civil Española: Armas y Pertrechos I*. Barcelona: Ediciones Folio

S.A., 1997. This book is a compilation of pictures and descriptions of weapons, ammunition, military vehicles, flags, insignias, and overall accoutrements used during the Spanish Civil War. This source was a helpful visual aid that partly inspired my costume and props.

Henry, Chris. *The Ebro 1938: Death Knell of the Republic*. Oxford: Osprey, 1999. This book

presents an in-depth analysis—including maps, schematics, photographs, and artistic depictions—of the main stages of the Ebro campaign, from July to November of 1938.

Studying the maps and other visual representations helped me understand the heavy losses sustained by the International Brigades, and why the Ebro offensive was the beginning of the end for the Second Spanish Republic. This book consolidated my decision to choose the Ebro front as the setting for the main portion of my play, and it helped me visualize how my characters would have been cut off and backed against the river, with no way out.

Jackson, Gabriel. "Multiple Historical Meanings of the Spanish Civil War." *Science & Society* 68, no. 3 (2004): 272–76. <https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.68.3.272.40301>. This article helped me understand the Spanish Civil War in the wider context of world depression, the rise of fascist dictatorships, and the confrontation among fascist, communist, and democratic capitalist forces in the European stage. It also helped me appreciate that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade members fought a war that was fundamentally ideological, rather than caused by territorial conflicts or frontier disputes.

Katz, William L. "June 12, 1937: Oliver Law Became Brigade Commander." *Zinn Education Project*. Accessed October 15, 2022. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/>. This article was my first introduction to Oliver Law, a Black commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who died in battle in Spain in 1937. As a measure of true integration, I found it significant that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was not only the first desegregated American combat unit, but that Law was the first Black American to lead white soldiers in battle. I used this source to present Oliver Law as a trailblazer in my play.

Katz, William Loren, and Marc Crawford. *The Lincoln Brigade: A Picture History*. 3rd ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989. This book provides the historical context for a compilation of pictures of the Abraham Lincoln brigadiers, during the Spanish Civil

War and also as activists on the home front. I was struck by the photos of Black and white American soldiers fighting and relaxing together in Spain, ten years before President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which ended racial segregation in the U.S. armed forces in 1948. This source helped me visualize the brigadiers and their surroundings, and it served as partial inspiration for my decision to write about a Black and a white soldier in a trench together.

*Lynching Information Collection*, Tuskegee University Archives Repository. This is the most complete record of lynchings occurring in the U.S. from 1882 to 1968. Twenty-four African Americans were killed from 1936 to 1939—the years spanning the Spanish Civil War—and 3,446 African Americans were lynched over the complete 86-year period. I used this source to inform my portrait of Sergeant William and his motivation to join the fight in Spain.

McCain, John. “The Good Soldier.” *The New York Times*. March 25, 2016, New York edition, sec. A. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/opinion/john-mccain-salute-to-a-communist.html?searchResultPosition=1>. This article was written by Senator John McCain as a tribute to Delmer Berg, the last Abraham Lincoln Brigade member, who died in 2016. Though McCain held anti-communist views, he respected the Abraham Lincoln Brigade members’ sacrifice and their commitment to fighting fascism. Reading this article, I felt that the time may have come for the American public—regardless of politics—to appreciate the historical contributions of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Pastor García, Daniel, and Antonio R. Celada. “The Victors Write History, the Vanquished Literature: Myth, Distortion and Truth in the XV Brigade.” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 89, no. 7-8 (December 2012): 307–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2012.731576>.



This article argues that the myth and legend of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade pose the risk of standing in the way of the facts. Reading it made me appreciate that the reported numbers (of the total members, of those killed in battle, etc.) vary widely across sources. I also learned here that the Spanish Civil War was the first time in history in which women chose to voluntarily travel to a faraway destination, leaving their old lives behind to fight for a cause they believed in.

Sandvick, Clinton. "The Abraham Lincoln Brigade: The Historiography of the American Soldiers in the Spanish American War." *DailyHistory.org*. Accessed January 23, 2023. [https://dailyhistory.org/The\\_Abraham\\_Lincoln\\_Brigade:\\_the\\_Historiography\\_of\\_the\\_American\\_soldiers\\_in\\_the\\_Spanish\\_American\\_War](https://dailyhistory.org/The_Abraham_Lincoln_Brigade:_the_Historiography_of_the_American_soldiers_in_the_Spanish_American_War). This article reviews three generations of history books about the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, from the initial first-person accounts of the volunteers themselves to the more recent efforts from scholars who had access to extensive archival materials. This guide pointed me to some books I had not known about, and it helped me evaluate their contributions in the context of when they were published.

Zaretsky, Robert. "The International Brigade 2.0." *Foreign Policy*. March 20, 2022. In early 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky asked for the help of international volunteers: about 20,000 people, coming from over than 50 countries, answered the call. As these events took place, I was reminded of the approximately 40,000 volunteers that joined the International Brigades to assist the Second Spanish Republic. This article, published approximately one month after the war erupted in Ukraine, draws a strong parallel between the international

volunteers that served in both conflicts, and underscores that the legacy of the International Brigades continues to shape the world today.