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Between myth and reality

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2018, Spring

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The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War

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The International Brigades came to Spain to fight fascism, but helped crush the anarchist social revolution.

In recent years, many leftists and even anarchists glowingly cite the communist-organized International Brigades (IB) that went to Spain to fight fascism during the late 1930s as an example relevant to many of today's struggles. Men and women came from around the world to join forces with the army of the liberal Republican Spanish government in its civil war against a military-fascist rebellion that began in July 1936 led by Gen. Francisco Franco, who was aided by Hitler and Mussolini's governments. The authoritarian right was finally triumphant in 1939.

Anarchist author and activist, David Graeber, often mentions the Brigades as a model of social solidarity when urging support for the current struggle for the autonomous region of Rojava in the Kurdish sector of Syria.

Singer/songwriter David Rovics dedicates a moving song to the memory of the 3,000 volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, in his "The Last Lincoln Veteran," which nostalgically

recalls left anti-fascist solidarity, “When we all stood side by side.”

In response to the rise of far right and openly white supremacist and Nazi groups in recent years, direct anti-fascist opposition has mobilized, and the exploits of the IBs, particularly the U.S.-based Abraham Lincoln Brigade (ALB) are frequently described as early opponents of fascism, heroic, to be admired for fighting “the good fight,” even if they ultimately did not win.

But, there are important elements of this history that are often left out, making it very difficult to draw useful lessons from the tale.

During the first half of 1936 in Spain, there was an upsurge of massive, self-organized collectivization of factories and fields and the storming of prisons to free political prisoners even before the anarchist militias defeated the fascist rebellion in more than half the country at the end of July. By the time the rebellious military began the Civil War, there was also a social revolution occurring in the anarchist dominated sections of Spain.

Immediately after the initial repelling of Franco’s forces, most notably in Barcelona on July 18, the anarcho-syndicalist CNT rapidly organized popular militias dedicated to egalitarian self-management.

As part of their resistance to the authoritarianism of the traditional military, they elected officers who were delegates recallable if they lost the confidence of the ranks. Plans and policies were also agreed upon by all, in each unit, through open discussion.

By contrast, the International Brigades were only organized by the Soviet Union’s Communist International (Comintern) in September of 1936. Brigade volunteers did not arrive in Spain until that winter and the Lincolns only arrived and joined the battle in February 1937.

The organizational structure of the International Brigades, dominated by the Comintern, was modeled on the Soviet military, with explicitly hierarchical, authoritarian ranks. Promotions were made from above, and with political loyalties in mind. Only Communist Party members were trusted in the highest positions.

There were political commissars in each battalion to manage the fighters' political education and to carry on campaigns against anarchists and Trotskyists, coinciding with the murderous Stalinist campaigns against all suspected dissidents in the Soviet Union and throughout the world.

Many IB volunteers expressing political opinions differing from those of the Communist functionaries managing the brigades (including the Lincolns) were given extremely dangerous assignments, imprisoned and even executed.

After May 1937, when Communists gained control of Spain's central government, IB units, including those from North America, were also used to help repress anarchists and non-Stalinist Marxist groups and individuals, as well as crushing the rural and urban collectives created in 1936. This essentially ended the social formations that defined the Spanish Revolution, hence, doing duty the fascists had intended.

In April 1939, Stalin decided to abandon the anti-fascist fight and sign a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Anti-fascist coalitions were terminated until the German military invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. After that, the U.S.S.R. joined the Allied powers in the war.

The current U.S.-based organization representing the official history of the veterans of the ALB, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA), and its earlier incarnation, the Volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, were founded and maintained by loyal Communist Party members, faithful to the Stalinist line and hostile to anarchists and non-Stalinist Marxists (generally labeled Trotskyists by them).

But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ALBA has endeavored to reach out to non-communists involved in anti-fascist activities. It has worked hard to present a strongly positive view of the role of the North American volunteers in the Spanish conflict which included the Canadian Mackenzie—Papineau Battalion. It sponsors a variety of cultural and educational activities designed to celebrate the veterans and the Brigade.

The organization has also softened its Stalinism and has even published an article sympathetic to anarchists in its official magazine, *The Volunteer*, for September 2017—“Forgotten Fighters: American Anarchist Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War” by Kenyon Zimmer—which deals with the anarchist role in the fight against Franco’s forces and for the social revolution. The September issue also has a review, “No Pasaran” by George Esenwein, discussing a book which presents a variety of perspectives, some critical of the Stalinist role in Spain. Neither of these articles would have been permitted a few decades ago.

If groups like the ALBA are now willing to publish articles and sponsor speakers sympathetic to the anarchist role in the Spanish events of the 1930s, why should we care about the quarrels of the past? Why do they matter since there is no longer a Soviet Union or Communist parties?

Part of the answer is that it is as important to confront the history of repression from the left as well as from the right. As long as problems of hierarchy and domination are glossed over or ignored rather than being directly and fully confronted, as long as people continue to accept systems of inequality and subjugation as temporary lesser evils, any group can develop along a path similar to that trod by the communists of the past.

Anti-fascist coalitions between anarchists and authoritarians should be engaged in with great care. Such coalitions have proven to be inherently unstable and temporary as a result of

the different means and goals of each group, notwithstanding the good intentions of individual participants.