

**SPANISH CIVIL WAR  
(1936-1939):  
ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
BRIGADE**



# SPANISH CIVIL WAR (1936-1939): ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE

## Description

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, including how and why the brigade formed, its experiences in Spain during the civil war, and how these soldiers were treated when they returned home.

## Subjects

US History, World History, European History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- University of Madrid
- Jarma River Valley
- Valley of the Fallen

## Essential Questions

- What were the causes of the Spanish Civil War? What were the two sides fighting for in the Spanish Civil War?
- How and why did Americans get involved in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side?
- What was the experience of black soldiers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigades during the Spanish Civil War?
- What happened to the American soldiers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade once they returned home?

## Academic Summary

Albacete, Spain

July 6, 1937

My Dear Friend,

I'm sure that by this time you are still waiting for a detailed explanation of what has this international struggle to do with my being here. Since this is a war between whites who for centuries have held us in slavery, and have heaped every kind of insult and abuse upon us, segregated and jim-crowed us; why I, a Negro who have fought through these years for the rights of my people, am here in Spain today?

Because we are no longer an isolated minority group fighting hopelessly against an immense giant. Because, my dear, we have joined with, and become an active part of, a great progressive force on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of saving human civilization from the planned destruction of a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power. Because if we crush Fascism here we'll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world from the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's Fascist heels. All we have to do is to think of the lynching of our people. We can but look back at the pages of American history stained with the blood of Negroes; stink with the burning bodies of our people hanging from trees; bitter with the groans of our tortured loved ones from whose living bodies ears, fingers, toes have been cut for souvenirs, living bodies into which red-hot pokers have been thrust. All because of a hate created in the minds of men and women by their masters who keep us all under their heels while they suck our blood, while they live in their bed of ease by exploiting us...

...We will crush them. 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.

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. Here, where we're engaged in one of the most bitter struggles of human history, there is no color line, no discrimination, no race hatred. There's only one hate, and that is the hate for Fascism. We know why our enemies are. The Spanish people are very sympathetic towards us. They are lovely people. I'll tell you about them later...

*Excerpts from a letter from Canute Frankson, Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain, as repeated in Nelson and Hendricks, Madrid 1937: Letters from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (New York: Routledge, 1996)*

On 17 Jul 1936, after months of planning by several military leaders, Nationalist rebels under General Francisco Franco staged an uprising designed to topple the Spanish government. The Spanish army fractured, some supporting the Republican (government side), but most supporting Franco. Within days, all of Spain was engulfed

in an open civil war, one that would rage for three years and ultimately lead to a Nationalist dictatorship under Franco.

Shortly after the civil war started, socialist elements in Spain called for help defending the republic. Stalin's Soviet Union and Mexico answered the call. Western powers, leery of being dragged into a war, distanced themselves from the conflict, but individual socialists and communists from around the globe began pouring into Spain, many in defiance of their home countries. Calling themselves the "International Brigades", foreigners eventually numbered 32000-35000 soldiers fighting in Spain. Among these numbers were around 2800 men and women from the United States.

Organized in January 1937, the US volunteers called themselves the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and were a loose conglomeration of socialists, labor unionists and other leftists interested in fighting fascism. Of the 2800 or so that eventually served in Spain, almost 1/3 lost their lives during the war. Included in these numbers were dozens of black Americans, many of whom equating Spanish Nationalist right-wing ideas with the Jim-crow racism they themselves had experienced firsthand. At a time in our nation's history when the US was still in the grips of legalized segregation as a result of the Plessy decision forty years earlier, these black Americans found in Spain a society that accepted them as individuals and soldiers in a common cause. Unfortunately, the US government didn't see them as heroes. When the war ended with a Franco victory in 1939, Americans who had served in Spain were seen as radicals and troublemakers. Although some served in the US military fighting fascism and totalitarianism during WWII, they did so in segregated units and squadrons. It would be another 20 years before America was ready for fundamental social changes.

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, including how and why the brigade formed, its experiences in Spain during the civil war, and how these soldiers were treated when they returned home.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of the American Lincoln Brigade and its involvement in the Spanish Civil War.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Americans, and in particular black Americans, chose to join the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in defiance of US policies.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the soldiers were treated when they made it back to the United States after the Spanish Civil War.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What is a mercenary? If an American chooses to fight in a foreign war (not against the US), should he or she be able to do so? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War (20 min)
- Video – Americans in the Spanish Civil War (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the Abraham Lincoln Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on the Abraham Lincoln Brigades (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Exit Ticket / Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail the story of the Abraham Lincoln Brigades, including the reasons why Americans chose to fight in the Spanish Civil War in violation of US policies and how the soldiers were treated when they made it back to the United States after the war.

## Extension

### **On tour: University of Madrid (monument to International Brigades)**

While on tour, students will undoubtedly see different memorials and monuments to various men and/or regiments of the Spanish Civil War, whether they be in the Valley of the Fallen (where Franco is buried), where a fascist monument was built to honor those killed during the Civil War, or in various other cities and towns, where since 1975 smaller monuments have been erected to honor those that lost their lives fighting Franco. Spain is still very much a divided nation today when it comes to Franco's regime. Right-wing groups, many of them allied with conservative elements of the Church, long for the dictatorship, while left-wing radicals seek to bring Spain into line with other more modern European nations. There is no "official" monument to the international brigades in Spain, at least not any more, after Spanish courts forced the removal in late summer 2013 of the Memorial de las Internacionales at Madrid University (where a great deal of fighting took place – often building to building). As students tour the campus for themselves, perhaps they can consider why the Spanish courts forced the monument's removal.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [alba-valb.org/](http://alba-valb.org/)  
The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives at New York University's Tamiment Library. Outstanding website with a tremendous amount of primary and secondary sources – highly recommended for both students and teachers. Especially good for those doing extensive research on any aspect of the Spanish Civil War, and perhaps the most comprehensive site of its kind on the Internet. Much of the archive is now online and searchable. ALBA's board is made up of writers, film makers, university professors and cultural workers from the US and Europe.
- [sitemaker.umich.edu/spanishcase/home](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/spanishcase/home)  
"The Spanish Case: Was it Fascism?" (website) – secondary source from the University of Michigan – excellent details on the policies and structure of Franco's philosophy and regime.
- [www.guerracivil.org/](http://www.guerracivil.org/)  
"The Spanish Civil War: 1936-1939" (website) – detailed site with good links on the Spanish Civil War
- [libraries.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/intro.html](http://libraries.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/intro.html)  
The Visual Front: Posters of the Spanish Civil War (website of primary sources) – from the University of California San Diego's library website
- [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SPlawO.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SPlawO.htm)  
"Oliver Law" (website) – secondary source on the first black officer to lead an integrated military force
- [spanishcivilwar1936.com/](http://spanishcivilwar1936.com/)  
Spanish Civil War and the Franco Years (website). Outstanding website dedicated to the Spanish Civil War, with a special section on the International Brigades. Contains primary and secondary sources – highly recommended for students and teachers.
- [english.illinois.edu/maps/scw/knox.htm](http://english.illinois.edu/maps/scw/knox.htm)  
"Premature Anti-Fascist" (website article)
- [slideshare.net/ginesandra/the-international-brigades-13012319?from\\_search=1](http://slideshare.net/ginesandra/the-international-brigades-13012319?from_search=1)  
The International Brigades PowerPoint
- [teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes – from Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [youtube.com/watch?v=em1uvodA1t0&list=UUBG10eoWw0RuQ4jMS7kGqsg](http://youtube.com/watch?v=em1uvodA1t0&list=UUBG10eoWw0RuQ4jMS7kGqsg)  
Americans in the Spanish Civil War 1 of 2 (video) – great video – 10 minutes – includes individual interviews from participants who went to Spain
- [youtube.com/watch?v=HYEuakXUlf0](http://youtube.com/watch?v=HYEuakXUlf0)  
Americans in the Spanish Civil War 2 of 2 (video)
- [youtube.com/watch?v=TDvz\\_53bjP4](http://youtube.com/watch?v=TDvz_53bjP4)  
WWII in Colour: Spanish Civil War (video)

- [youtube.com/watch?v=URtWFEKHsvs&list=PL656B8735AE836056](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URtWFEKHsvs&list=PL656B8735AE836056)  
British documentary on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (video) – part 1 of 12. This video series, approx. 2 hours, is probably too long for most history classes, but is highly recommended for teachers and students seeking to understand the story behind the Abraham Lincoln Brigades.

### **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish\\_civil\\_war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_civil_war)  
“Spanish Civil War” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham\\_Lincoln\\_Brigade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln_Brigade)  
“Abraham Lincoln Brigade” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco\\_Franco](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_Franco)  
“Francisco Franco” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_Brigades](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Brigades)  
“International Brigades” – Wikipedia article

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/ballad-of-the-spanish-civil-guard\\_ENG](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/ballad-of-the-spanish-civil-guard_ENG)  
Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/valley-of-the-fallen\\_a-controversial-monument\\_ENG](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/valley-of-the-fallen_a-controversial-monument_ENG)  
Valley of the Fallen – A Controversial Monument

### **Key Terms**

- Abraham Lincoln Brigade
- Comintern
- Communism
- Fascism
- Franco
- International Brigades
- Second Republic (Spain)
- Neutrality
- Socialism
- Spanish Civil War

