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THE COMMON CAUSE OF ALL ADVANCED AND PROGRESSIVE MANKIND:
PROLETARIAN INTERNATIONALISM, SPAIN, AND
THE AMERICAN COMMUNIST PRESS, 1936 – 1937

A Thesis Presented

by

G. Scott Waterman

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

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for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in History

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ABSTRACT

In July 1936, units of the Spanish military, backed by a collection of domestic right-wing elements and by fascist governments elsewhere in Europe, staged a rebellion against the legally constituted national government that had been elected five months previously. The governing bloc, an ideologically broad coalition of liberal republicans, Marxists, and anarchists known as the People's Front, embodied the strategy formulated by Stalin and the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow to stem the advance of international fascism and mitigate the danger it posed to the Soviet Union and, by extension, the communist movement and the global radical working class it represented. During the destructive and bloody civil war that ensued, the Comintern sponsored recruitment of anti-fascist volunteer fighters from around the world. Before the war ended, nearly 3,000 Americans had surreptitiously traveled to Spain to defend its republican government. This thesis addresses the question of how these volunteers came to develop an allegiance to their global political and social movement strong enough to motivate them to risk death in what they perceived to be its defense against fascism.

Drawing on the theoretical formulations of political scientists Benedict Anderson and David Malet, this thesis will demonstrate that over the course of a century, radical proletarian internationalism developed into a community of working-class revolutionaries, mostly within or allied to communist parties, whose shared ideological formulations and sociopolitical aspirations bound them together, irrespective of nationality. American members of that global community – whose numbers and influence had recently expanded in the context of the Great Depression and the People's Front strategy of liberal-left conciliation – had their perceptions and priorities about the Spanish crisis shaped by the American communist press. Examination and analysis of its coverage of the political, social, and military dimensions of the conflict there will demonstrate it to have been copious and persistent, imparting unmistakably to its readership the centrality of the Spanish people's struggle against fascism in the defense of the global working class, whose political and social survival was at stake. The thesis will argue, in the context of the contentious historiography of American communism, that although the messages conveyed to American proletarian internationalists via the communist press reflected policies and priorities determined in Moscow and designed to serve the interests of the Soviet state, American anti-fascists were for the most part well informed ideologues whose decisions reflected both the concerted influences of their movement's leadership as well as their own deep commitments to a more equitable world.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Donald F. Waterman (1921-1989). From the time of my earliest recollections he instilled in me a conviction of the importance of history and inspired my commitment to studying it. His example also doubtless influenced my decision to study and pursue a career in medicine, explaining the late age at which I began my formal graduate education in history.

My father's ability to recount the events and overtones of the era in which he developed his own political and historical consciousness was so acute that I have always felt that I, too, experienced the time period examined herein. I am grateful that he lived long enough to see me outgrow my youthful naivety about the nature of twentieth-century communism without forsaking my reverence for the international proletarian movement and its founding vision of a humane world of rationality and justice.

I dedicate this thesis also to my daughters, Martha and Donna Waterman, who do not merely study efforts to fashion a more equitable global society; they live them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As an academic physician then in his mid-50s, my notion of pursuing a graduate degree in history may have sounded like a quixotic one. But if it did, Alan Steinweis did not let on that he thought so. I am grateful for his support – encouraging but not sugar-coated – from the time I introduced myself and my tentative plan to him. His generosity was soon mirrored by Dona Brown, then director of graduate studies, and her successors in that position, Abby McGowan and Bogac Ergene, along with History Department staff members Kathy Truax and Kathy Carolin. Any doubt about the wisdom of my decision was dispelled by the intellectual challenges and delights provided by the faculty members in whose seminars I had the good fortune of enrolling. In addition to Professor Steinweis they include Jaqueline Carr, Frank Nicosia, Jon Huener, Steve Zdatny, Andy Buchanan, and Nicole Phelps. To the latter two I direct particular gratitude: to Professor Buchanan for rich, extended discussions during which the plan for the present project was hatched, informed, and shaped, and to Professor Phelps whose historiography seminar taught me what historians actually do and whose tutelage helped me actually do it. Her incisive mind, keen eye, and exacting scholarly standards compelled me to produce the best work of which I am capable.

Daisy Benson of the Bailey/Howe Library patiently guided my acquisition of the historical research skills without which the present work would not have been possible. Outside of the University of Vermont, my appreciation extends to the staff of the

Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University, and in particular to librarian Kate Donovan. Her assistance in navigating the library's vast collection of resources, and her consistent good nature and expertise in providing it, helped to make my research both fruitful and enjoyable. I am also grateful to Terrie Albano of the Communist Party USA and the *People's World* for permission to reproduce images from the *Daily Worker* and for her interest in this project.

As crucial as each of the aforementioned has been to my ability to complete this undertaking, none of it would have been feasible without the acquiescence – and, for the most part, enthusiastic encouragement – of my wife, Sandy Steingard. Although she doubtless tires of hearing from me about communists and socialists, fascists and Nazis, bourgeois and proletarians, she understands the allure of the scholarly life and hers is an inspiring example of one, devoted as it is to the wellbeing of society's least understood and most marginalized members. My admiration, love, and gratitude may too often go without saying.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In an interview with historian Peter Carroll, Esther Silverstein recalled events of the 1930s that led to her radicalization and eventual decision to join the communist movement. Having trained as a nurse at the University of California, Silverstein worked at the Marine Hospital in San Francisco, where she cared for seamen injured in the maritime workers' strikes in that city. Following the outbreak of the civil war in Spain, she was assigned a female patient who was comatose upon admission to the hospital. Despite appearing moribund, the woman awoke abruptly and asked the nurse, "Has Madrid fallen?" lapsing back into unconsciousness upon Silverstein's assurance that the city remained at that point in Republican hands. Subsequently volunteering her nursing services to the defenders of the embattled Spanish Republic, the twenty-five-year-old Silverstein traveled across the continent to New York, where she boarded the *Normandie* for the trip to Europe. At a rally in Paris, before entering the war zone on the other side of the Pyrenees, she donated to the cause of Spanish democracy the fifty dollars her parents had given her to buy a return ticket, should she change her mind.¹

What does that anecdote reveal about the mental world of members of the working-class movement in the United States during the latter half of the 1930s? This thesis will examine the origin, consolidation, and mobilization via the printed word of proletarian internationalism, manifest in the decisions of nearly 3,000 young Americans,

¹ Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 47.

a majority of whom were affiliated with the Communist Party, to risk – and, in many instances, lose – their lives fighting fascism in Spain during its 1936-39 civil war. It will trace the evolution of the international workers’ movement from its beginnings in mid-nineteenth century Europe, to its transformation in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the world’s first socialist state, to the development of the institution through which the global proletariat aimed to achieve its ultimate goal of world revolution: the Communist International (Comintern). The American section of the Comintern, the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA), was the political home of many working-class radicals in the 1930s and was, at the direction of the Comintern, the organization to which responsibility for recruitment of young American ideologues for service in Spain fell. In addition to outlining the development of the workers’ movement in the United States, this thesis will place its analysis of American participation in the Spanish Civil War in the context of the contentious historiography of American communism.

Although people have participated and died in armed conflict throughout history, the nature of their attachments to those in whose defense they served changed when subjects of dynastic realms became citizens of nation-states. The cause for which combatants in the modern era have most often been willing to die is the putative security and success of their own countries. Recognizing that this normative emotional attachment to one’s nation-state had previously been under-theorized, political scientist Benedict Anderson sought over three decades ago to redress that deficiency. In his influential work on the subject, Anderson conceives of the nation as an “imagined community,” in that its

members have never met, nor even know anything about, the vast majority of their co-nationals. He outlines how, during the early modern and modern eras, developments in the Americas and Europe, and subsequently much of the rest of the world, transformed a type of horizontal allegiance that had previously operated within small groups of individuals united by kinship or other forms of close relationship into something keenly felt within far larger groups whose members' ties to one another are only notional. Among the cultural forces Anderson sees as having contributed to the origin and spread of nationalism is language, specifically print communication.²

While Anderson's work was directed toward understanding the foundations of people's willingness in the modern era to die for their countries, the more recent work of political scientist David Malet has been motivated by a desire to grasp the motivations and, relatedly, methods of recruitment of those who voluntarily fight for groups *other than* their own nation-states. His study aims to shed light on the decisions of the "tens of thousands of ... foreigners fighting in modern civil wars," noting that such combatants have been, "if not in direct violation of the laws of their own country and the international community, at least acting against commonly accepted norms of military service, under which individuals are presumed to owe allegiance to their own country and to fight on its behalf and not that of an external group."³ Malet structures his empiric investigation according to two dichotomous variables: 1) whether or not ethnicity is the

² Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

³ David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

parameter that distinguishes the two parties in conflict, and 2) whether or not the foreign combatants belong to the same ethnic group as those with whom they have volunteered their services. His typology of foreign fighters thus constitutes a two-by-two matrix within which all four permutations of his two variables are represented. The category of interest for the present project on the Spanish Civil War is the one for which 1) the conflict is not an ethnic one, and 2) the foreign volunteers do not share ethnic identifications with those whose cause they are supporting. Malet understandably terms such fighters “true believers,” explaining that their motivations are “ideological” and intended to “preserve institutions of shared transnational identity.”⁴

Just as Anderson emphasizes the centrality of print communication in forging and perpetuating nationalist sentiment in the era of its development, Malet recognizes the vital role of what he calls “foreign fighter recruitment messaging.” Specifically, he notes that successfully attracting foreign combatants entails “framing distant civil conflicts as posing a dire threat to all members of a transnational community of which both the foreign recruits and local [fighters] are members.”⁵ Anderson’s and Malet’s formulations juxtaposed to each other suggest that “imagined communities” may be national or transnational, and that in either case their members’ identifications with them may be of sufficient strength to engender a willingness to fight and die in their defense. Moreover, written communication serves the function of binding together national and transnational communities and reinforcing their members’ affiliations with one another.

⁴ Ibid., 42–43.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

Any assumption that deep political allegiances among people in the modern era are limited to those united by nationality is belied by the responses of members of the international workers' movement, and most especially by those affiliated with communist parties, to the right-wing assault on the Spanish Republic that commenced in 1936. Thousands of people from a variety of nations who previously knew no Spaniards, spoke no Spanish, and knew little about Spain, volunteered to risk their lives, not for their countries but for their social class and political ideas, conceived in global terms.

This thesis will demonstrate that proletarian internationalism developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a global community of working-class revolutionaries whose shared ideological formulations and sociopolitical aspirations bound them together, irrespective of nationality. It was that community, in the United States and elsewhere, that by the mid-1930s was prepared to devote itself to the defeat of fascism in Spain. Although never representing a large proportion of the US population, American communism was an integral component of the global proletarian movement whose direction was set by the Comintern in Moscow. The identification of American communists – a majority of whom by the summer of 1936 were native born⁶ – with this world-wide community was maintained, bolstered, and shaped in large part via printed materials produced by leaders of the movement and read by its members and their allies. Prominent among those publications in the United States during the 1930s were the CPUSA newspaper, the *Daily Worker* (and, beginning in 1936, the *Sunday Worker*), and

⁶ Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 381.

the weekly magazine *New Masses*, which was closely associated with the party. Examination of coverage of the Spanish crisis in those periodicals, among other relevant documents, will demonstrate their roles in the transmission of political ideology from points of origin in Moscow, via the CPUSA leadership, to individual readers. The printed word – specifically the dissemination of a common lexicon and overall linguistic framework within which relevant conceptualizations were cast and shared – will be shown to have been vital to the consolidation and mobilization of the community of American proletarian internationalists committed to the defense of the Spanish Republic.

The thesis is structured chronologically by chapter, although within chapters themes that were intertwined contemporaneously are elucidated individually for the purpose of analysis. Chapter 2 traces the development of modern proletarian internationalism from its origins in nineteenth-century Europe through the establishment of the Comintern following the Russian Revolution, the formation and evolution of the Communist Party in the United States, and the international communist response to the challenge of fascism embodied in the People's Front strategy. A grasp of the trajectory of the international workers' movement is vital for an understanding of the development of the American left, including the CPUSA, which in turn is prerequisite to apprehension of the context within which the proletarian response to the Spanish rebellion was mounted.

Following that essential background material, the bulk of the argument of the thesis and its empiric support are presented in the subsequent three chapters. Chapter 3 examines the period from the elections of February 1936, in which the Spanish People's

Front came to power, until the July military uprising that instigated armed conflict. Chapter 4 picks up at that point and analyzes the first months of the war, culminating in the arrival in November of the International Brigades, rendering a nominally civil war a *de facto* international one on both sides. And the interval extending from that point through the early months of 1937, when most Americans who would volunteer their services to the loyalist cause were either already fighting in Spain or had reached the decision to go there, constitutes the subject of Chapter 5. In each of those three chapters, material drawn from the copious coverage of Spain in the communist press will demonstrate how readers – for the most part members or allies of the revolutionary working class – were prompted and guided to see in international fascism a grave and immediate threat to their global political movement and social class, and in People’s Front anti-fascism under communist leadership its antidote. Such “messaging,” aimed largely at those whose allegiances to the then-century-old radical proletarian internationalist community were already strong, resulted in the Spanish Republic becoming the central preoccupation of American leftists, in defense of which thousands of them were willing to risk their lives.

CHAPTER 2: PROLETARIAN INTERNATIONALISM AND AMERICAN COMMUNISM

When Spanish society erupted in civil war in 1936, one group of Americans was already poised to take an active interest in the outcome. The modern radical international proletarian movement, whose origins traced back a century, was at that point represented in the United States by a newly vitalized Communist Party. Its stake, and that of its fellow parties around the world, in the bloody ideological struggle enacted on the Iberian Peninsula had been, and would continue for most of the war's duration to be, made unmistakably explicit to the party's adherents and allies, largely through its publications. Subsequent chapters of this thesis will examine how the community of working-class internationalists in the United States was mobilized in the effort to save the Spanish Republic from its right-wing assailants. An understanding of that process, however, necessitates a grasp of the global movement of which it was part. And that, in turn, requires an appreciation of the convolutions and upheavals the movement underwent in its development, from humble beginnings in the nineteenth century to the eventual establishment of a sophisticated global network of revolutionary parties whose capacity to shape the priorities and activities of radical workers and their allies in the United States and elsewhere was by 1936 formidable.

The emergence of an industrial working class in the modern sense was a component of the industrial revolution whose origins were in Great Britain and northwest Europe. Among the earliest formal statements of proletarian international affiliation was

an *Address to the Belgian Working Classes* produced in 1836 by the Working Men's Association. Asserting the identity of "the interests of working men in all countries of the world," it proceeded to recommend that Belgian workers "form, if possible, a union with countries around [them]," since "a federation of the working classes of Belgium, Holland and the Provinces of the Rhine would form an admirable democracy."¹ Several such organizations soon followed, including the Fraternal Democrats and the Communist Association for the Education of Working Men. These relatively small groups were mostly centered in London and engaged largely in educational efforts – anticipating the importance to the proletarian movement of print communication – and expressions of solidarity with workers in other countries.²

Within just a few decades of the origins of modern nationalism described by Benedict Anderson and outlined in Chapter 1, Marx and Engels observed that capitalism, as a result of its continuous need to expand markets, was undermining the premises of nationalism. The condition of the industrial laborer, "the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. ... The working men have no country," they asserted.³ In an effort to address the disjuncture between the goals pursued by nation-states and the needs of the proletariat, Marx and

¹ Marcel van der Linden, "The Rise and Fall of the First International: An Interpretation," in *Internationalism in the Labour Movement, 1830-1940*, ed. Frits van Holthoon and Marcel van der Linden, vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 327.

² Ibid.

³ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), xviii; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2008), 54.

Engels founded the Communist League in 1847, and they outlined their program in the *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The failures of the revolutions of 1848-49 and the restoration of ruling class power that followed led to the league's dissolution in 1852, but its founders continued to collaborate with fellow revolutionaries on formulation of a proletarian internationalist program.⁴

In 1864, the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA, eventually dubbed the First International) was founded in London. As was true of its predecessor organizations, it was ideologically committed to working-class internationalism, manifest among other ways in its support of the Union and the abolition of slavery during the American Civil War, despite the suffering which British textile workers were experiencing as a result of disruptions in the cotton trade.⁵ The IMWA diverged from its relatively small forebears with respect both to its structure and its activities. It established chapters in several continental European countries as well as the United States and Latin America. In addition, the new organization focused less on political education and propaganda and more on the economic conditions of the working class and promotion of proletarian solidarity. The economic antecedents to the establishment of the First International included the expansion of 1850-57 followed by the world-wide crisis of 1857-58, prompting a return to political activity that had been squelched in the aftermath of the defeats of 1848-49. This period witnessed rapid, albeit uneven, technological

⁴ John Riddell, ed., *Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress, March 1919*, 1st ed., The Communist International in Lenin's Time (New York: Anchor Foundation, 1987), 2-3.

⁵ Philip S. Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 82-83.

developments in the clothing and building industries, among others, creating anxiety and protest among the laboring classes.⁶

Labor was at that point better organized in Great Britain than elsewhere in Europe or the Western Hemisphere, prompting employers there to seek strike breakers from abroad. That development motivated British workers to support labor organizing on an international basis, as outlined in the address, *To the workmen of France from the working men of England*, published in 1863 in the British trade-union periodical *Beehive*: “A fraternity of peoples is highly necessary for the cause of labour, for we find that whenever we attempt to better our social condition by reducing the hours of toil, or by raising the price of labour, our employers threaten us with bringing over Frenchmen, Germans, Belgians, and others to do our work at a reduced rate of wages.” The statement goes on to exhort French workers “not to allow our employers to play us off one against the other, and so drag us down to the lowest possible condition, suitable to their avaricious bargaining.”⁷ The burgeoning internationalization of labor markets – occurring alongside those of goods and capital – supplied the logic, at least for a time, for the internationalization of proletarian organization.

The internal ideological heterogeneity of the First International proved to be a weakness and a factor in its attenuated lifespan of just a dozen years. The organization was composed of republican nationalists in the mold of Giuseppe Mazzini, followers of

⁶ van der Linden, “The Rise and Fall of the First International: An Interpretation,” 328–30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 330–31.

the mutualism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, collectivist anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin, and, of course, Marxian socialists. Formed in the wake of French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the Paris Commune of 1871 was a touchstone for the European left that, political scientist Carl Levy argues, was dominated neither by Marxists nor by anarchists. Nonetheless, its collapse served as a focus for a schism between those two factions, with anarchists coming to distinguish their version of internationalism from what they saw as an authoritarian, statist socialism advocated by Marx and his allies.⁸

While acknowledging the significance generally ascribed to the rift between Marx and Bakunin and their followers, labor historian Marcel van der Linden discerns other, more structural determinants of the demise of the IWMA, which was disbanded in 1876. Although Britain had a clear head start both on industrialization and labor organization, parts of the continent and of North America began to catch up. Thus, while British trade unionists had for a time felt the need for international cooperation in order to bolster their own bargaining positions, the gains won by at least a portion of the working classes elsewhere tempered British workers' enthusiasm for internationalism. In addition, the global economic depression that began in 1870 abetted a shift in the labor movement from grand ideological objectives to more immediate economic ones. And lastly, the period following the Franco-Prussian War saw the sort of chauvinistic nationalism that had previously been the province of the bourgeoisie expand into the working classes, as a result of both purposeful public policies and the aspirations of sections of the proletariat.

⁸ Carl Levy, "Anarchism, Internationalism and Nationalism in Europe, 1860–1939," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 50, no. 3 (September 2004): 333–36.

For those reasons, van der Linden views neither the split between anarchists and Marxists nor the destruction of the Paris Commune itself as the chief causes of the collapse of the IWMA.⁹ Although ephemeral, Lenin later wrote that “the First International laid the foundation of the proletarian, international struggle for socialism.”¹⁰ And it was a crucial antecedent to the mobilization of the global working classes in the cause of Spain decades later.

The form that struggle assumed next was fashioned in Paris in 1889. Addressing the delegates to the congress at which the Socialist International (Second International) was inaugurated, Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, noted that attendees came not as standard-bearers of their separate nations, but rather under “the red flag of the international proletariat” whose “single common enemy [was] private capital, whether it be Prussian, French, or Chinese.” For the next twenty-five years, representatives of socialist parties and trade unions – mostly but not entirely in Europe and the United States – gathered every two to three years to advance the cause of working-class internationalism. Lacking centralized authority, the congresses debated resolutions but could not enforce their implementation. In efforts to bolster the coherence and discipline, and thus potency, of the organization, anarchists were barred from membership in 1896, and four years later the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) in Brussels was formed as

⁹ van der Linden, “The Rise and Fall of the First International: An Interpretation,” 332–34; Levy, “Anarchism, Internationalism and Nationalism in Europe, 1860–1939,” 336–37.

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, “The Third International and Its Place in History,” in *Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress, March 1919*, ed. John Riddell, 1st ed., The Communist International in Lenin’s Time (New York: Anchor Foundation, 1987), 32.

the standing executive body of the International.¹¹ The successor to Marx's First International of the mid-nineteenth century appeared poised to enter the twentieth century as a consolidated instrument of proletarian internationalism.

Arguably the centerpiece of the program of the International was peace, described in a unanimously approved resolution from its initial congress as "the first and indispensable condition of any worker emancipation." The resolution characterized war as "the most tragic product of present economic relations, [which] can only disappear when capitalist production has made way for the emancipation of labor and the international triumph of socialism." In the question of the inevitability of capitalism engendering war, the eventual fracture of the international socialist movement into reformists and radicals could be discerned, particularly after 1900. The "right" advocated gradual reforms within the context of democracy while the "left" called for revolutionary mass action; the social democratic parties in several countries divided along reformist (or broad) versus revolutionary (or narrow) lines. For its part, the International maintained a principled commitment to revolutionary Marxism while practicing ideological flexibility in the interest of unity.¹²

The challenge of pursuing Marxist internationalism in the face of growing nationalist tensions and colonial rivalries increasingly plagued the International after

¹¹ R. Craig Nation, *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 3–4; Janet L. Polasky, "Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism," *History of European Ideas* 14, no. 4/6 (August 1992): 211.

¹² Nation, *War on War*, 10–12.

1905. At the Stuttgart congress in 1907, a debate on “Militarism and National Conflict” considered four different resolutions on the subject, whose contents ranged from a call for a general strike in case of war to claims of the legitimacy of national self-defense. Eventually a synthesis was achieved and approved unanimously. It identified the capitalist system as the cause of militarism, exhorted socialists to work in their own countries to prevent war, and concluded with a statement authored by leftist Rosa Luxemburg: “Should war break out in spite of all this, it is their [socialists’] duty to intercede for its speedy end, or to strive with all their power to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule.” But it was the president of the International, Belgian Emile Vandervelde, who had the last word, seeking in his closing statement to unite the disparate factions at the congress while affirming national rights to self-defense, thereby leaving unresolved the crucial dilemma then facing the international proletarian movement.¹³

At its two subsequent congresses – Copenhagen in 1910 and Basel in 1912 – the International reaffirmed its formulation that only the demise of capitalism and imperialism would protect the world from war. In 1910 the organization advocated as an interim prophylactic measure the elimination of standing armies, and two years later characterized “the fear of the ruling classes that a world war might be followed by a proletarian revolution” as “an essential guarantee of peace.” But the proposal for an

¹³ Polasky, “Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism,” 211–13 (quote on 213); Nation, *War on War*, 15–16.

agreement that would bind the constituent members of the International to a general strike in the event of war again failed, leaving the body without a unified, and potentially potent, strategy. These debates occurred in the context of deepening divisions between reformists and revolutionaries within the organization, with members of the former faction expressing the conviction that socialism would be achieved within the framework of the nation-state system and that colonialism and national self-defense were not inconsistent with socialist sensibilities. Although such sentiments were disavowed by leftist delegates such as Luxemburg and Lenin, as the European cataclysm approached, German Social Democrats August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht could coin as their party's slogan, "For This System, Not One Man and Not One Penny," alongside affirmation of the doctrine "never to abandon a single piece of German soil to the foreigner."¹⁴

In the crisis that followed in the wake of the assassination of the Austrian archduke in Sarajevo, the International sponsored anti-war demonstrations, and in late July 1914 the executive committee of the ISB met in Brussels but failed to formulate an effective anti-war plan. With the European powers mobilizing for war, a representative of the German Social Democratic party met in Paris on August 1 with leaders of the French Socialist Party, though the meeting did not yield a coordinated strategy or set of commitments. Three days later, as German forces invaded Belgium as a prelude to their attack on France, parliamentarians of Europe's two most prominent socialist parties

¹⁴ Nation, *War on War*, 16–19 (quotes on 17-18); Polasky, "Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism," 213–14.

unanimously cast their votes in favor of their respective governments' requests for military appropriations, barely camouflaging the considerable divisions in each party. War had exposed the schism within the international workers' movement and when it counted, national "defensism" had prevailed over socialist internationalism. Mirroring developments across the continent, International President Vandervelde entered his country's war cabinet and some socialists' nationalist bellicosity came to rival that of their non-Marxist fellow countrymen. Having been unable for years to reach agreement on policies toward bourgeois democracy, nationalism, the potential weapon of the general strike, and ultimately war itself, the Second International unraveled in what Lenin labeled a "sheer betrayal of socialism" that revealed the "ideological and political bankruptcy of the International."¹⁵

In early 1915, socialists from the two sides of the war met separately – those from the Allied Countries in London and representatives from the Central Powers in Vienna – while socialists from neutral countries were ineffective at advocating collectively for peace, and the ISB remained inactive. Efforts at reanimating international socialist opposition to the war led to the organization of a conference at Zimmerwald, Switzerland in September 1915, bringing together opponents of the war from both sides. Although a majority of those present at Zimmerwald aimed to restore the International as a peace movement, a left-wing faction led by Lenin advocated for recognition that the prewar organization had shown itself disastrously ill-equipped – organizationally and

¹⁵ Nation, *War on War*, 20–25; McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, quote on xix.

ideologically – for the task, and that a new one was needed. On the day after the conference adjourned, the bloc of delegates assembled by Lenin created an informal group, dubbed the Zimmerwald Left, dedicated to revolutionary socialist internationalism. They recognized that the Second International had become simply a forum for consultation among socialist parties organized on national lines. The parties had, at least tacitly, accommodated themselves to the international system and to working within it for reforms on behalf of the proletariat. With the international system embroiled in the war that socialists had found themselves unable to prevent, the Zimmerwald Left sought establishment of a Third, uncompromisingly revolutionary, International to represent the interests of the laboring classes of all nations.¹⁶

The October 1917 seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in Russia was seen by its protagonists as the first step in the inevitable collapse of the capitalist world system and its replacement by international revolutionary Marxism. They, in fact, counted on it, grasping the improbability of survival of a lone communist regime in an otherwise-capitalist world. And for a relatively brief period of time their hopes and assumptions appeared to be on the verge of realization. The end of the war was attended by the collapse of the old polities of central and eastern Europe amid strikes, revolts, and the formation of communist parties from the left wings of social democratic movements. Most reassuring of all was the November 1918 revolution in Germany. But after the Spartacist uprising in Berlin was violently suppressed in January 1919, and the Bolshevik

¹⁶ Nation, *War on War*, 66–67, 99, 233–36.

success in Russia failed to take hold anywhere else, revolutionary socialists apprehended the need for an international party to lead the world revolution. Lenin's call dating back to 1915 for a Third International to assume leadership of a radicalized world-wide Marxist revolutionary movement would take the form, in 1919, of the Communist International. Among the many questions it would face during the course of its existence would be how to maintain the primacy of proletarian internationalism over the parochial nationalisms on which its predecessor organization had so catastrophically foundered.¹⁷ As will be evident below, that challenge not only remained unsolved; it became an especially contentious focus of discord within the workers' movement in the context of international involvement in the civil war in Spain.

The First Congress of the Communist International opened in Moscow on March 2, 1919. It was attended by fifty-one delegates representing thirty-five political organizations in twenty-two countries, including the United States.¹⁸ Despite the Comintern's explicit foundation as an international body, its location in Moscow reflected the crucial fact that Russia was to date the only instance of successful communist revolution. In that context the prestige that attached to the Russian Bolsheviks was inevitable and, combined with the relative weakness of other communist parties and the enormous practical difficulties posed by travel from foreign countries to and from Moscow, it ensured that Russians would dominate the operation of the Comintern. Nevertheless, the question of whether the Bolshevik model of a vanguard party of

¹⁷ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 1–2, 11.

¹⁸ Riddell, *Founding the Communist International*, 13.

revolutionary purists would necessarily apply to the Comintern and its affiliates required the attention of the 1920 Second Comintern Congress, at which the more than two hundred delegates in attendance approved the “Twenty-one Conditions” of admission to the organization drafted by Comintern President Grigory Zinoviev. Inspired by Lenin, the conditions were designed to ensure a disciplined and highly centralized Third International. The Third and Fourth Congresses in 1921 and 1922 further reinforced the application of the Bolshevik organizational and ideological model to the Comintern, laying the foundation of its “Russification,” as protection of the Soviet state in what was turning out to be a non-revolutionary world became a communist preoccupation that would later guide Comintern policies on Spain.¹⁹

The failure of German revolution in 1923 and the period of “relative capitalist stabilization” that followed revealed that earlier optimism about the impending European revolution had been misplaced. Those developments of the early and mid-1920s also served to emphasize the isolation and thus potential fragility of the Soviet state. Lenin’s death in January 1924 prompted bitter intraparty struggles over the direction of the Revolution, with Stalin emerging as Lenin’s successor. The subsequent four years saw shifts between “right” and “left” tendencies within both the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, but Bolshevization of the Third International and its constituent parties around the world proceeded apace, leaving the leadership of the Russian party in firm control of the international communist movement. Among the

¹⁹ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 14–17, 23–24, 38–40, 226. For an account of the effects of “Bolshevization” of the Comintern on the American Communist Party, see Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

doctrinal turns initiated by Stalin in this period was that of “socialism in one country.” Although he defended it against charges of deviation from Leninist orthodoxy, the notion that the Soviet Union could survive without successfully fomenting revolution elsewhere was of tremendous significance. Noting that the conditions for European revolutions had become unfavorable, Stalin argued that the survival of the Soviet Union was paramount to the ultimate triumph of the international proletariat. Thus, the interests of the Soviet state became – by this logic – congruent with those of the Comintern and of communists everywhere: the “national” interests of the USSR, in other words, were identical with those of the international working class.²⁰ This principle – which became axiomatic for orthodox communists – was one of the most consequential of the Stalin era.

The Sixth Comintern Congress met over the course of the latter six weeks of the summer of 1928. Its theorists had perceived evidence that conditions for the ultimate crisis of capitalism, wars among the imperialist nations, revolutionary ferment, and the spread of socialism were turning its favor.²¹ The “left turn” embodied in the highly sectarian policies that characterized international communism’s “Third Period,” which the Sixth Congress inaugurated, was disastrous for many of the world’s communist

²⁰ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 41–52. For a devastating attack on the revisionist doctrine of “socialism in one country” by Stalin’s primary antagonist during the period following Lenin’s death, along with a withering critique of Comintern policy under Stalin’s influence, particularly its perceived abandonment of proletarian internationalism, see Leon Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*, 4th ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 1996).

²¹ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 81.

parties.²² Inside the Soviet Union, Stalin pursued acceleration of the process of building socialism, with programs of rapid industrialization and forced collectivization of agriculture alongside campaigns of class warfare directed against “bourgeois specialists,” peasants, and members of the intelligentsia. Those militant and disruptive internal policies were mirrored in the Comintern’s project of enforcing ideological homogeneity, resulting in persecutions and expulsions which took a major toll on communist parties in Europe and America.²³ Particular scorn was directed toward social democrats, labeled “social fascists” and considered more dangerous than actual fascists by virtue of their pseudo-revolutionary camouflage. Although historian E. H. Carr argued against the assumption that Stalin’s tight control was behind the change of Comintern policy, characterizing him as “heavily engaged elsewhere” and “not tempted to concern himself with ... an institution he had always despised,” evidence from the Comintern Archives to which Carr did not have access leads to a different conclusion.²⁴

As a national leader Stalin’s primary concern was the security of the Soviet Union, and by the end of the 1920s (if not earlier) it appeared to be the Comintern’s as well. Among its roles was garnering support among the international proletariat for the

²² The “Third Period” is so named because it follows the first four years of the Comintern's existence (1919-23) during which conditions for world-wide revolution appeared favorable, and the subsequent four years (1924-28) of apparent stabilization of the world capitalist system.

²³ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 81–83. For a discussion of the impact of Third-Period Comintern policies on the efforts of the American Communist Party to create a mass working-class party, see Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²⁴ Edward Hallett Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 5; McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 90–92.

defense of the standard bearer of socialism. Soviet relations with other governments, however, were the remit of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, or Narkomindel. Early on, ties between it and the Comintern were close, but during the period of "relative capitalist stabilization" the diplomatic mission of Narkomindel diverged from what had been the revolutionary mandate of the Comintern. Stalin's "socialism in one country" doctrine had been reassuring to western governments but the strident rhetoric of the Third Period threatened to complicate diplomatic efforts with the West and thereby potentially endanger Soviet security. By 1930 Comintern leaders combined admonitions against "rightist deviation" (associated with the "social fascist" formulation) with warnings of danger from the left in the form of excessive revolutionary fervor on the parts of foreign communist parties, especially the German one. The Executive Committee of the Comintern passed a resolution in early 1930 that made explicit the expectation that "the defense of the Soviet Union against the threat of imperialist attack is more than ever before the important task of all sections of the Communist International." Although some room for local initiative among communist parties may have remained, by the early 1930s the Comintern had to a great extent become a centralized and bureaucratized instrument of the foreign policy of one country.²⁵ Later Soviet interest in and Comintern policy on Spain were thus synonymous.

In the context of Third Period doctrine, the Nazi assumption of power in Germany in 1933 was initially viewed by the Comintern as more of an opportunity than a threat.

²⁵ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 94–96, 118–19.

The final crisis of world capitalism appeared to be on the horizon and communist parties needed to be vigilant and prepared to seize the impending opening for revolution. Their attitude was evident in the optimistic slogan, “After Hitler, us.” Over the following couple of years, however, a very different reality became apparent. The consolidation of Nazi control was accompanied by the destruction of the large and previously powerful German working-class movements, including the Communist and Social Democratic Parties. In the wake of Third Period policies, not only had the largest communist party outside the Soviet Union been demolished; fifty-six of the seventy-two parties of the Comintern were illegal in their home countries, an Austrian proletarian revolt against the right-wing regime in Vienna was suppressed, and a potential fascist takeover in France appeared plausible.²⁶ It began to occur to some communists that a change of strategy might be in order.

With the Nazis in power in Germany, Europe’s largest Comintern sections were the Communist Parties of France and Czechoslovakia. Their leaders, Maurice Thorez and Klement Gottwald respectively, urged the Comintern to seek anti-fascist cooperation with social democratic parties (“social fascists” in Third Period parlance), but were initially rebuffed. Following right-wing demonstrations against the government of French Premier Édouard Daladier in Paris on February 6, 1934, communist and socialist workers staged a successful general strike. Although further anti-fascist collaboration was at that point opposed by both the French Communist Party and the Comintern, the new General

²⁶ Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, Harvey Klehr, and John Earl Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943*, Annals of Communism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 51–52.

Secretary of the latter, Georgi Dimitrov, soon became convinced of the advisability of a united front, and in July 1934 the French Communist and Socialist Parties signed an anti-fascist “Pact of Unity of Action.” Stalin seems only to have endorsed the new People’s Front policy overtly in December, after Thorez had succeeded in expanding it to include members of the French bourgeois center-left party.²⁷

The foregoing account appears to furnish evidence that, despite the Bolshevization of the Comintern and its constituent parties, and the Russification of their objectives, rank-and-file workers and individual communist parties were still able to take some initiative and exert some influence over policy. The motivation behind the Comintern’s change of course from Third Period ideological stridency and confrontation to People’s Front anti-fascist eclecticism and cooperation has been subject to intense historiographical debate. Dissident-communist historian Fernando Claudín avers that the original signal for the policy shift actually came from Stalin and that its “explanation lies – as with other turns made by the Comintern – in Soviet policy, and, more specifically, in Soviet foreign policy.”²⁸ More recent Comintern historians Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, however, advance a more complex formulation in which initiative from various communist parties and debates within the Comintern leadership interacted with the Soviet state’s goal of security in the face of fascist expansionism to give birth to the

²⁷ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 121–27. The expressions *front populaire* (French) and *frente popular* (Spanish) are rendered in English as “people’s front” or “popular front.” This thesis uses the former translation, which arguably captures their meaning more accurately.

²⁸ Fernando Claudín, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 176; also cited in McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 127.

policy innovation. Whatever its origins, it was enshrined as doctrine at the Seventh Comintern Congress in the summer of 1935, where Dimitrov sought to reconcile the apparent contradictions between communist internationalism and bourgeois nationalism that the new coalitions entailed:

[P]roletarian internationalism must, so to speak, “acclimatize itself” in each country in order to sink deep roots in its native land. *National forms* of the proletarian class struggle ... in the individual countries are in no contradiction to proletarian internationalism; on the contrary, it is precisely in these forms that the *international interests* of the proletariat can be successfully defended.²⁹

None of this should be mistaken for a reversal of Bolshevization in the Comintern. In fact, the mid- to late 1930s saw an intensification of centralized control and a strengthening of Stalin’s influence, as became evident in the context of the Spanish Civil War. Although the Spanish Communist Party had been among Europe’s smallest, it nevertheless played a part in the formation and electoral success of the People’s Front coalition there. The right-wing coup that followed the 1936 election created a dilemma for Stalin and the Comintern: a Soviet presence on the Iberian Peninsula might frighten French (and other western) public opinion and drive them to the right, while a victory for the forces under Franco would create another foothold for fascism in Europe that could attract further support, thereby threatening Soviet security. Although Stalin decided by late September to arm the Loyalist forces, the potential perils for Soviet foreign policy of both failure and success of the left in Spain were never far from his mind. Dimitrov

²⁹ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 129–31.

emphasized to the Comintern Executive Committee that the objective in Spain was the defeat of fascism and not the creation of a Soviet-style state. The communists were in that crucial sense aligned with moderate socialists and bourgeois liberals, and in often-bitter conflict with revolutionary socialists, Trotskyists, and anarchists whose aims were more radical. Thus, the heavy hand of the Stalinist Comintern was directed in Spain against both fascists and leftist revolutionaries, as will be seen in greater detail below.³⁰

Perhaps the greatest contradiction to the apparent ideological flexibility represented by the People's Front policy of the Soviet government and Comintern was the Great Terror, unleashed by Stalin between 1936 and 1938. Although its purely internal manifestations and effects are beyond the scope of this thesis, its consequences for the international communist movement are not. Swept up in the xenophobic atmosphere of the purges were members of communist parties from Germany, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Italy, Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, the Baltic states, and Poland. The Polish party sustained the greatest devastation: in the spring and summer of 1937, an estimated five thousand Polish communists were arrested and shot. Many purge victims were officials in the Comintern apparatus, which Stalin had become convinced was a nest of anti-Soviet subversives and spies. Speculation regarding motives for the Terror has ranged widely over the years. Stalin's own well documented paranoid outlook is surely relevant, but does not address the timing of the purge or its specific targets. Some historians have viewed the attack on early followers of Lenin as evidence of what

³⁰ Ibid., 136–42.

amounted to a counter-revolution. Archival research supports the formulation, credited to historian Jonathan Haslam, that among the intended objects of Stalin's violence were those who maintained a commitment to revolutionary internationalism over the interests of the Soviet state.³¹ That ideological stance was most associated with Leon Trotsky, founder of the Red Army who was expelled from the party, and eventually from the USSR, in the late 1920s. As will be evident below, the promiscuous application of the epithet "Trotskyism" came to denote all deviations from Stalin's brand of Russocentric communism, with often-grim consequences for those so labeled.

Having outlined the origins and development of the international workers' movement, attention will now turn specifically to its evolution within the United States, where, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, it had taken root in the context of rapid industrialization. The Socialist Labor Party, established in the 1870s as the first socialist party in the United States, was soon eclipsed in membership and influence by the Socialist Party of America, founded in 1901. The Socialist Party (SP) was, during the early twentieth century, an uneasy amalgam of varying backgrounds and points of view. In the aftermath of the failure of the Second International to prevent the First World War, and buoyed by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the left wing of the SP broke away in 1919. Reflecting one of the schisms present in the parent party, a faction dominated by the SP's foreign-language federations formed the Communist Party of America, while a group that included more American-born members organized the rival Communist Labor

³¹ Ibid., 142–57; Firsov, Klehr, and Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943*, 111–27.

Party. In what historian Theodore Draper argues set an early precedent, members of the American communist movement sought adjudication of their internal disputes by the newly inaugurated Comintern in Moscow, which instructed the American party to unite. Moreover, according to Draper's formulation, the prestige enjoyed by the Russian party as the world's only communist party to have achieved political power in its home country ensured its dominance of the Comintern, and thus of what became the Communist Party of the USA as well.³²

As the likelihood of world-wide revolution receded during the early 1920s, Lenin urged, and the Comintern instituted, a "united front" policy whereby communists were directed to pursue their political work through mass organizations such as labor unions and broader based farmer-labor parties. Although American communists achieved some limited success, sudden changes in Comintern policy kept party membership low and internecine factional struggles prominent. "Bolshevization" of the Comintern in the mid-1920s – entailing increasingly direct control by the Comintern over non-Russian parties – reinforced both the image of the Communist Party as out of touch with mainstream American life and the reality of its marginal role in American politics. As described above, Stalin's eventual assumption of power in Moscow following Lenin's death brought with it a series of dizzying doctrinal shifts with which members of the American

³² Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957); Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (1960; New York: Vintage Books, 1986). Draper, a former journalist with the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, eventually became a liberal critic of communism. These two volumes were among those commissioned by the Fund for the Republic, which in the 1950s recognized the need for scholarly examination of the American communist movement. Together they provide a helpful -- albeit traditional, in their emphases on party organization and leadership -- analysis of the formative years of the CPUSA.

communist leadership were preoccupied and on which several of their careers foundered. That James P. Cannon was expelled for his 1928 conversion to Trotskyism while Jay Lovestone was stripped of party membership for his “right deviation” serves to underscore the extent to which fealty to Stalin and readiness to support his policies as relayed via the Soviet party and Comintern to its affiliates around the globe had become the touchstone of good standing in the international communist movement.³³

The dire hardships of the Great Depression that developed in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929 would only eventually improve the position of the CPUSA as a serious political force. The party sought to organize the unemployed and, for example, participated in leadership of the 1932 Hunger March in Detroit, but they derived little lasting benefit from such activities. The early 1930s saw the leftward ideological drift of many intellectuals, though not yet to the ranks of the CPUSA, whose Third Period dogmatism since the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928 – especially its hostility toward the non-communist left – seriously impeded its aspirations of becoming a mass party. The successes of the labor movement and the increase in strike activity in 1934 occurred for the most part independent of CP involvement, whose efforts at infiltrating and taking over leadership of mass organizations – “boring from within” – was not proving effective at engendering working-class or agrarian commitment to the party. Prior to the

³³ Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*.

Comintern's shift in policy toward the People's Front strategy, CPUSA membership remained heavily foreign-born, urban, unemployed, and small.³⁴

The turning point that marked the rise of the CPUSA from marginality to relative prominence in American politics was the movement of the Comintern to a far more conciliatory – and eventually overtly collaborative – stance toward the non-communist left. As noted above, the termination of Third Period stridency was motivated by the growing threat (not least to the security of the USSR) of fascism/Nazism and the concomitant reversals suffered by the international proletarian movement. In that context, the CPUSA was given wide latitude by the Comintern to broaden its appeal and thereby its potential impact. Although the communist parties in France and Spain became open members of People's Front coalitions, in the United States the party unambiguously affiliated with the Democrats – specifically Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal – gaining particular influence in the Democratic parties of Washington and California as well as in the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota and the Labor Party of New York. CPUSA support of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), born in 1935 to organize industrial workers excluded from the American Federation of Labor (AFL), provided a major venue for communist leadership. The party also came to play prominent roles in the areas of unemployment and social insurance legislation, youth and student

³⁴ Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). This volume may be conceived as the third of a trilogy whose first two entries (cited above) were authored much earlier by Draper. Chronologically, it picks up where Draper's second book ends. Moreover, Klehr makes use of archival material compiled by Draper and housed at Emory University.

organizations such as the American Youth Congress and the American Student Union, as well as the National Negro Congress and the League of American Writers.³⁵

The acknowledgment that fascism rather than bourgeois liberalism represented an imminent danger to the working class, and to the embodiment in the Soviet polity of its political aspirations, was the crucial doctrinal reversal that made possible the role played by the CPUSA in the response of American leftists to the civil war in Spain. By 1936 many American progressives – workers in the CIO and other labor organizations, the unemployed, college students and other young people, intellectuals, African Americans, Jews, New Deal liberals, as well as socialists and communists – had begun to define their political identities as “anti-fascists.” This triumph of the People’s Front strategy of the Comintern and the CPUSA was expressed in a rehabilitation of the image of the party from a fringe organization of foreign-oriented revolutionaries to a legitimate, energetic participant in American progressive politics. That transition, in turn, abetted growth in the party’s size and influence, and thus its ability to facilitate sympathy and tangible aid – up to and including enlistment for combat – from Americans to the Spanish Republic.³⁶ Stalin’s frequently repeated assertion that “the cause of Spain is the common cause of the whole of progressive and advanced mankind” became self-fulfilling.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.; Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

As outlined above, modern proletarian internationalism developed over the course of several decades into a substantial and variegated movement. By the mid-1930s its best organized and most active segment in the United States was the CPUSA. Always controversial due to its revolutionary ideology and foreign ties, assessments of its participation in society and politics – including its role during the war in Spain – became especially fraught with the onset of the Cold War. The formal historiography of American communism dates to that era and has since the late twentieth century been considered to divide along “traditionalist” versus “revisionist” lines.³⁷ Those scholars in the traditionalist camp – exemplified by Draper and Klehr, cited above – have tended to focus on the institutional history of the CPUSA and its subservience to the Soviet party and Comintern. They are thus inclined to view all policies of and activities directed by the party as having been motivated ultimately by the needs of the Soviet state and carried out at its behest. The first scholarly challenge to that conceptualization of American communist history came in the context of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. “Revisionist” historians of that era, trained in social history and motivated to locate the heritage of contemporary radicalism in a rehabilitated left-wing past, pursued studies of communist-led reform movements in various localities and among various racial and ethnic groups in the United States, particularly during the 1930s. The responses of

³⁷ For much more on this topic, see, *inter alia*, Maurice Isserman, “Three Generations: Historians View American Communism,” *Labor History* 26, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 517–45; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, “The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field,” *Labour History Review* 68, no. 1 (April 2003): 61–78; Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,” *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 139–73; and John McIlroy, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism: A Comment,” *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 195–202.

American communists and their affiliated groups to local labor and racial conditions were adduced to demonstrate the legitimacy and authenticity of communists' involvement in American progressive politics.³⁸

The present study does not seek to litigate that decades-old dispute, both sides of which have empirically demonstrable merit. Rather, it seeks to elucidate the means by which thousands of American ideologues – a majority of whom were affiliated with the CPUSA – who came to imagine themselves members of a global community of anti-fascist proletarian internationalists were mobilized by the party and its copious publications to risk their lives in its defense.

³⁸ Two paradigmatic examples of “revisionist” histories of American communism are Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), and Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

CHAPTER 3: TRIUMPH OF THE PEOPLE'S FRONT AND THE COMMUNITY OF PROLETARIAN INTERNATIONALISTS

By the mid-1930s there was no shortage of crises competing for the attention of the global proletarian community. In 1931 a reactionary, expansionist Japanese regime seized from China the resource-rich province of Manchuria, establishing there its satellite state of Manchukuo the following year. In the heart of Europe a political party and movement that had operated on the far-right fringe of political life was elevated to power in 1933, and its *Führer* quickly set about crushing Germany's formidably organized working class, among other enemies. Mussolini's unabashed, if anachronistic, colonial aspirations found expression in the brutal Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. All of these threats, among others, were the subjects of considerable coverage and commentary in the American communist press. But what became the defining ideological battleground of the era, and arguably of the century, had an unlikely address on the southwest periphery of Europe.

After a brief review of the historical context in which the deep and longstanding fissures of Spanish society and politics eventuated in open warfare, this chapter will begin the examination of the central role played by publications of, or associated with, the CPUSA in nurturing the commitment of the American left to the cause of the Spanish Republic. It will focus on the period from the elections of February 1936, which brought the People's Front to power, to the military rebellion of July of that year, which sparked civil war. It is during that interval that one may discern the themes around which

members of the radical working-class movement and their allies had their understandings of the significance of that far-away conflict structured for them by the communist press. Much of the evidence adduced in this and subsequent chapters is drawn from the official organ of the CPUSA. First appearing on January 13, 1924, the *Daily Worker* was by 1936 a full-scale newspaper covering local, national, and international events.¹ It was also the nation's most visible exponent of proletarian internationalism. Its editorial writers and cartoonists in New York, its reporters in Spain, and the many party ideologues and guest columnists whose work appeared in its pages warned of the grave fascist threat to the world's working classes. They emphasized the centrality of the People's Front anti-fascist coalition strategy, including its communist leadership, Soviet inspiration, and ultimate revolutionary goals. They presented the Spanish workers' and peasants' republic as an exemplar of the humane and progressive world for which their movement strove but whose precariousness necessitated vigilance and dedication.

Among the world's languages, Spanish ranks second only to Chinese as boasting the largest number of native speakers. That fact is a residue of the outsized importance of Spain in the history of the early modern world. But its trajectory among the world's nations following its remarkable global territorial conquests in the sixteenth century has been largely one of declining prominence. Spain's deteriorating international status, culminating in the 1898 loss of what had remained of its empire as a consequence of a disastrous war with the United States, led some scholars to view the Iberian nation as

¹ Morris U. Schappes, *The Daily Worker: Heir to the Great Tradition* (New York: Daily Worker, 1944), 19.

suffering from a chronic illness.² Although consideration of Spain as an exceptional case among the nation-states of western Europe has doubtless been overdrawn, the slow pace and unevenness of its modernization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries distinguished it from much of the rest of the West and laid the foundation for the horrific carnage of its eventual civil war.³

Throughout the nineteenth (and well into the twentieth) century, Spanish politics remained disproportionately in the hands of the owners of large estates – the *latifundios*. Although the northern part of the country experienced gradual industrialization, capitalism in Spain was until recently primarily agrarian. The commercial and manufacturing classes were too small and politically insignificant to engender a bourgeois liberal revolution of the sort seen elsewhere during the nineteenth century. Dire economic conditions combined with political chaos resulted in the abdication of the monarch and the establishment of the short-lived First Republic in 1873, but it was crushed by the army the following year and the monarchy, along with the power of the old elites, was subsequently restored. The decades preceding World War I saw the rise of working-class and regionalist movements whose roles in the later civil war would be central. The Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE, its Spanish initials) was founded in 1879, followed shortly by its affiliated trade union organization, the UGT. While those

² Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston, eds., *Spain and the Great Powers in the Twentieth Century* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

³ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 19. For a more extensive treatment of the origins of the war, see Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Rev. (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 2–186.

institutions attracted members of the increasingly militant industrial working class, landless day-laborers in the rural south gravitated toward anarchism, though by 1910 that ideology had taken sufficient hold among the urban proletariat as well to populate the anarcho-syndicalist trade union, the CNT. And shortly following the end of the war, consistent with the history of the revolutionary workers' movement outlined in Chapter 2, the PSOE divided over the question of joining the Comintern, with the more radical faction forming the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) in 1921.⁴

In the context of growing proletarian militancy, including strikes in the mining and iron and steel industries, and consequent anxiety among the ruling classes, a *coup d'état* was staged by General Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1923. The period of his dictatorship would come to be revered in retrospect by the right wing, but its failures led eventually to the king's abdication and the advent in 1931 of the Second Republic. The reformist government that was elected to write a constitution included Socialists, Republicans, and Radicals (members of a centrist party popular among the rural bourgeoisie). Anti-clerical elements of the new, democratic constitution proved especially divisive, coming in the wake of a spate of church burnings that expressed the revulsion of the working classes toward the reactionary role of the Church in Spanish society. The previously disparate right – consisting of two groups of monarchists, several collections of overt fascists, and Catholic-oriented organizations – was coalesced under the banner of the Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (CEDA; Spanish

⁴ Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 17–34.

Confederation of Autonomous Right-wing Groups) by José María Gil Robles.

Meanwhile, the left was weakened by the refusal of anarchists to ally with the governing coalition and by the decision of the Socialists to run on their own, independent of the bourgeois Republicans. Consistently attacking the Republic as an instrument of Bolsheviks, Freemasons, and Jews whose goals included the destruction of Christian Europe, the right – now in alliance with the Radicals – won power in 1933, ushering in the “*bienio negro*” (black two years).⁵

Although candidates of the left probably received more votes than their opponents on the right, the disunity of the former combined with likely electoral irregularities perpetrated by the latter had handed power to the CEDA and its partners, which they were determined to use to dismantle the reforms of the previous two years. The reactionary aims of the right fed radicalization of the working classes, expressed most consequentially in the events of October 1934 in the northwest mining province of Asturias. The socialist and anarchist trade union organizations, together with the Communists, staged a strike that was brutally suppressed, in a foreshadowing of the coming civil war, by legionnaires under the command of Francisco Franco. Events of that fall would reverberate for years but had the more immediate effects of bolstering the right’s determination to crush republican democracy while persuading the left that regaining power depended on its ability to reunite. The leader of the left wing of the Socialist Party, Francisco Largo Caballero, was convinced to temper his revolutionary

⁵ Ibid., 35–65.

impulses and ally with the Republicans, while the Communists were prompted in that same direction by the change of Comintern policy discussed in Chapter 2. The elections of February 16, 1936 returned the reins of government to a reunified left. The fissures that had long divided Spanish society, however, remained deep and dangerous.⁶

Although the American communist press did not become thoroughly preoccupied with events in Spain until the military *pronunciamento* of July 1936, the importance it attached to the success of the People's Front strategy – made official by the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in August 1935 – was nevertheless evident. Moreover, most of the themes that would come to characterize its coverage of the later civil war and the international politics surrounding it are discernable in the news articles, features, editorials, and photographs published during the five months between the elections that brought the People's Front to power and the right-wing *coup* that eventually brought it down. Collectively, these pieces served to instill and consolidate among a working-class readership and its allies several interrelated convictions that would tie them ever more tightly into the global community of proletarian anti-fascists.

On Spain's election day, readers of the *Sunday Worker* were apprised of the local stakes of that contest: "In the victory of the right there lies the danger of fascism. Included in the program of the People's Front is amnesty for 30,000 political prisoners ..., reinstatement of all workers dismissed for political reasons; restoration of all trade union rights and property confiscated after the revolution [of 1931]; dismissal of all

⁶ Ibid., 66–83. For a concise description of the prelude to and results of the February 1936 elections, see E. H. Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1984), 1-9.

Monarchist and fascist state officials and army and navy officers.”⁷ In the aftermath of the People’s Front triumph, euphoria over its electoral success mixed with a variety of other, complementary messages in the American communist press, including the continuing – indeed, building – dangers of world fascism, the leadership and ultimate revolutionary aims of communists in a broader-based, democratic movement, and the need for anti-fascist vigilance and activism at home.

“Do you wish to see the People’s Front in action against Fascism? Look at Spain!” the *Daily Worker* exulted two days after the elections. “World Fascism has good reason to tremble. All foes of reaction, of war, for the liberation of the toilers, have excellent cause to rejoice. We must drink deeply of the inspiration of our brother fighters in Spain,” it continued, proceeding to predict a leftist surge throughout Europe and urging on its American readership in its own “fight against war, against fascism, and for the workers’ every day needs against rapacious capitalism.”⁸ In a gesture of left-wing solidarity, Israel Amter, New York CP district organizer, wrote to his counterpart in the Socialist Party, Jack Altman, to suggest that they organize a joint celebration, noting that “the united front victory of the Spanish people against fascist reaction is a source of inspiration and strength to workers and anti-fascists throughout the world.” Recognizing that “the victory of our brothers in Spain is not yet assured,” Amter expressed the hope that proletarian unity “would pave the way for active help to the Spanish people by the

⁷ “The Spanish Elections,” *Sunday Worker*, February 16, 1936.

⁸ “Spanish People’s Front Victory is Smashing Blow at World Fascism,” *Daily Worker*, February 18, 1936.

labor movement and all other progressive and anti-fascist organizations.”⁹ In this aspiration lay the nub of the strategy of the left and, in particular, of its communist leadership.

The American communist press walked several lines in its coverage of Spain, among which was that between the optimism and pride it sought to engender in the aftermath of the electoral success of the People’s Front, on the one hand, and its desire to ensure that its readers remain vigilant against the threat of international fascism, on the other. Under the front-page banner headline, “People’s Front Wins Spanish Election,” a piece written the day after balloting titled “Fascists Threaten Civil War” warned of a potential “attempt by bloodshed to wipe out the smashing defeat delivered to [the right] by the overwhelming election victory of the anti-fascist People’s Bloc.”¹⁰ By the following month readers of the *Daily Worker* were reminded repeatedly that political violence in Spain was not merely potential, but actual. In describing fascist-instigated “terror in Spain,” the paper characterized the enemies of the People’s Bloc as “desperately seeking to provoke major incidents in their murder campaign ... since the opening of the Cortes (parliament) yesterday.”¹¹ And in its report of nine deaths and twenty injuries the previous week in violence perpetrated by the right, the *Daily Worker* described the responses to those provocations by “the masses” who gathered at the

⁹ “Spanish Election Victory Celebration Proposed,” *Daily Worker*, February 21, 1936.

¹⁰ “Fascists Threaten Civil War,” *Daily Worker*, February 18, 1936.

¹¹ “Fascists Push Terror in Spain,” *Daily Worker*, March 18, 1936.

German consulate in Madrid, where they shouted “Down with the Nazis!,” broke windows, and tore down and burned the Nazi flag.¹²

The concerns about international fascism that motivated the People’s Front policy, as well as its perceived relation to events in Spain, were evident in the anger demonstrated by supporters of the Republic in Madrid against the German government. And in early March the Nazis provided, in Hitler’s decision to violate Germany’s treaty obligations by moving his forces into the previously demilitarized Rhineland, ample justification for anxiety. *Daily Worker* readers were greeted on March 8 with a set of news articles announcing that “German troops officially crossed the River Rhine today for the first time in nearly seventeen years.” The next two-and-a-half years would witness continuous admonition in the proletarian press against complacency in the face of fascist/Nazi political and territorial aspirations around the globe. But although the paper noted that France, the nation whose territory was most immediately threatened by the Wehrmacht’s move into the Rhineland, had decided to request that the League of Nations impose sanctions against Germany, the emphasis of its coverage was on the presumed danger faced by the Soviet Union. The first piece on this topic, appearing on the front page, was headlined, “Hitler in Open Bid for War Alliance Against the Soviets.” Hitler’s move was cast primarily as a stratagem in his efforts to conclude a pact among the “imperialist bloc.”¹³

¹² “Nine Killed by Fascists in Spain,” *Daily Worker*, March 10, 1936.

¹³ “Hitler in Open Bid for War Alliance Against the Soviets,” “Nazi Troops Violate Pact by Occupation,” “War Chiefs Hold Secret Parley in Paris,” *Daily Worker*, March 8, 1936.

Subsequent coverage of German and Italian aggression revealed the dual nature of the task of the international communist movement in the era of the People's Front: consolidating and strengthening the ties of its adherents to the party and its Soviet mentor, while also drawing in left-wing and liberal allies by revealing the dangers of international fascism and offering the benefits of a broad alliance against it. On March 11 readers were apprised of the scale and pace of German rearmament, noting that during the current year "the Reichswehr, or regular army, will grow from 100,000 into an army of 900,000 trained men." The formation of "intensively trained and motorized" infantry and cavalry units, and a powerful air force, were described. And the near doubling of the number of ships in the German naval fleet was revealed as only the beginning of a build-up that included submarine and aircraft carrier construction, forbidden by the Versailles Treaty.¹⁴ A Sunday edition, two-page photo montage, including an image of armed soldiers standing at attention in a line that seemingly extends endlessly, appeared under the portentous title, "Europe is on the march again. With Nazi troops in the Rhineland, a new war threatens to engulf the world once more."¹⁵

The warning that fascism threatened the security of all of the peoples of the world often carried the corollary that the USSR was its primary target and that its protection was the paramount duty of all members of the global proletarian community. In an editorial appearing a day after its announcement of the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the *Daily Worker* interpreted Hitler's message as, "World capitalism, unite against the

¹⁴ "Nazis Expand War Machine at Terrific Speed," *Daily Worker*, March 11, 1936.

¹⁵ "Europe in on the March Again," *Sunday Worker*, March 22, 1936.

Soviet Union!” In response, it’s exhortation to the “toilers of America” was clear: “A victory for fascism, the destroyer of the trade unions, the enslavers of all toilers, ... would be a catastrophe to the workers of the whole world. To defend the Soviet Union is to act to defend every one of your own rights and your own aspirations.”¹⁶ The following day, under the headline, “Hitler War Moves Demand Vigilant Defense of Soviet Union,” *Daily Worker* readers were advised that “the key to Hitler’s policy today is his attempt to break through the antagonisms which prevail between the imperialist powers by lining up all the imperialists into a united front against the Soviet Union.” Collaborative relationships already forming among Germany, Italy, and Japan, the paper warned, could be strengthened by the enlistment of Great Britain and France, where “powerful reactionary forces are trying to coerce their governments to join the fascist bandwagon.”¹⁷ American workers, the paper editorialized later that week, must “support the peace policy of the Soviet Union” because, according to a maxim that would ironically reappear time and again as volunteers’ rationale for service in Spain, “America will only be able to stay out of war by helping to keep the world out of war.”¹⁸

The recognition by its leaders and by the Comintern that the growth of CPUSA influence in American politics depended on formation of a united front of the left long predated the People’s Front policy. As far back as 1924 the Comintern directed the American party to seek contact with a wider section of the masses via formation of a

¹⁶ “Redoubled Vigilance for Defense of Soviet Union,” *Daily Worker*, March 9, 1936.

¹⁷ “Hitler War Moves Demand Vigilant Defense of Soviet Union,” *Daily Worker*, March 10, 1936.

¹⁸ “Mobilize Actions at Once Against War Danger,” *Daily Worker*, March 14, 1936.

Farmer-Labor Party in support of the presidential candidacy of Wisconsin progressive Robert La Follette. Communist policy changes doomed that venture to failure but the idea became a recurrent one.¹⁹ Thus in late 1935, before any attention was focused on the upcoming elections in Spain, the Central Committee of the CPUSA adopted a resolution that asserted, “The building of a Farmer-Labor Party at the present time is the most burning need of the working class of America. ... The building of such a party is the only way in which the working people of this country can seriously undertake to improve their intolerable conditions ... and to ward off the growing menace of capitalist reaction, fascism and war.”²⁰ In contrast to earlier, tentative forays by communists into coalition politics, the Seventh Comintern Congress was to instill in the global proletarian community a sense of urgency in organizing united efforts against reaction and war.

On March 20, the *Daily Worker* published an editorial that was also to appear in a forthcoming issue of *The Communist International*. It began its sweeping survey of the global scene with the optimistic proclamation that “the ardent call of the [Seventh Comintern] Congress for unity of action has found a mighty response among the working class and the broadest toiling masses in Europe, Asia, and America.” After warning against the growing danger of war, emphasizing the need for vigilance in the aftermath of anti-fascist electoral victories in France and Spain, and trumpeting the “magnificent achievements of Socialism in the USSR,” the piece sought to ensure that its readers,

¹⁹ Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

²⁰ Quoted in “Build a Farmer-Labor Party Now,” *Daily Worker*, January 4, 1936.

perhaps dizzy from shifts in Comintern policies, perceived the revolutionary aims in the service of which the People's Front strategy was purportedly enacted. In contrast to a coalition that cedes ideological leadership to the bourgeoisie or non-revolutionary left, "The people's front policy ... strengthens the working class, prepares the ground for the smashing and overthrowing of fascism ..., and leads the toiling masses toward the decisive battles for their final emancipation."²¹ People's Front anti-fascism was thus to be understood by working-class revolutionaries as an incarnation of, and not a retreat from, proletarian internationalism.

In New York, the labor unions and working-class parties promulgated their joint program in a Manifesto of the United Labor May Day Committee, addressed "To the Workers of New York, Organized, Unorganized, Employed, Unemployed, Negro and White." The exhortation to coalesce under "the banner of international solidarity" with workers around the world and by "a mighty outpouring of masses prove our determination to build a decent world" was followed by an outline of aims that represented a marriage of traditional domestic labor interests, anti-racism, working-class political unity, anti-fascism, and loyalty to the USSR:

Against War and Fascism;
Against Negro Discrimination;
For Unemployment Insurance;
For the Thirty-Hour Week;
For the Organization of the Unorganized;
For the Workers' Rights Amendment;
For the American Youth Act;
For the Freedom of All Political Prisoners;

²¹ "The United Front Must Win -- In Spite of Everything!," *Daily Worker*, March 20, 1936.

For the Defense of Soviet Russia;
For a Farmer-Labor Party;
For Unity of the Workers Against Anti-Semitism.²²

The United Labor May Day Committee was chaired by Norman Thomas, longtime Socialist Party leader. While frequently quarreling with Thomas, his counterpart in the CPUSA, Earl Browder, came to be defined by his embrace of anti-fascist People's Front politics.

In an article originally published in the November 1935 issue of the CPUSA theoretical journal *The Communist*, Browder sought to distinguish for American communists his (and the Comintern's) vision of the united front from "the unprincipled government blocs that have been formed by the Social-Democratic Parties in Europe together with sections of the bourgeoisie." In contrast to what he characterized as the "bankrupt and discredited practices of the Second International," Browder described the united front as "a vehicle of collaboration between the organizations of the masses in struggle against capitalism, of all anti-fascist parties and groups, in the interests of the entire toiling population."²³ He would soon sound a more conciliatory note toward his fellow Marxists of the Second International, collaboration with whom would have its share of contention over the coming years. Among a group of articles under the headline, "Browder Stresses Need of Working Class Unity in Fight Against Menace of Fascist Drive Toward New World War," the CPUSA leader urged socialists "to join the struggle

²² "All Out on May 1 Against Fascism and War!," *Daily Worker*, April 17, 1936.

²³ "On United Front Government," *Daily Worker*, May 7, 1936, excerpted from Earl Browder, "New Steps in the United Front," *The Communist*, November 1935.

for the united front because it will strengthen both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party and thus strengthen the working class” in its “struggle ... against fascism and war.”²⁴

In CPUSA parlance the category of “fascism” came to denote not only its original Italian incarnation, along with German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese (as well as several other national) variants, but also right-wing and even conservative movements and ideologies in the United States. Thus, Browder’s report on behalf of the Central Committee to the party’s Ninth National Convention was summarized as declaring “that the Landon-Hearst-Wall Street ticket [referring to the 1936 Republican presidential candidate and some of his prominent supporters] is the chief enemy of the ... American people” and that “its victory would carry our country a long way on the road to fascism and war.” Turning to the anti-fascist People’s Front, the general secretary conceded “that the great majority are not yet prepared to turn to Socialism, as represented either by the Socialist Party or the Communist Party.” He explained that the CPUSA, therefore, came “forward with an immediate program which the masses are ready to support, ... which is the program of a people’s front, a program for democratic rights, for prosperity and peace.”²⁵ As the foregoing demonstrates, another line the American communist press walked – reflective of the dual imperatives faced by the movement’s leaders – was the one between portrayal of the People’s Front as broad-based and democratic versus

²⁴ Earl Browder, “Aim of United Front is Strengthening of Both Parties,” *Daily Worker*, May 25, 1936.

²⁵ “Browder Calls for Building of American People's Front to Halt Rising Menace of Fascism in the United States,” *Daily Worker*, June 25, 1936.

depiction of it as communist-led and revolutionary in intent. The former was vital for attracting allies and gaining influence, while the latter was necessary to reassure the party's base of support that its ultimate goals remained those of the committed radical proletariat. Both would be needed to support the eventual Comintern-led initiative to save Republican Spain.

That same line applied to coverage of Spain, where opponents of the new government were keen to paint it as “red” and thus threatening to non-communists. Supporters, on the other hand, recognized the need to court bourgeois liberals and moderate socialists while simultaneously convincing the global revolutionary left of the Republic's proletarian credentials and commitments. A few days following the elections, the *Daily Worker* reported from Madrid that “red flags appeared everywhere and the singing of the International could be heard. ... Left wing adherents, especially the working class, ... were overjoyed.”²⁶ Four days later the paper reframed the election results for a broader constituency: “‘Save Spain from becoming a Soviet Russian Colony’ was the battle cry of the Spanish reactionaries in the election, last Sunday, of 473 Deputies for the national Assembly. What they meant was: Save Spain for Fascism.”²⁷

A good deal of the reporting from Spain between the elections and the rebellion nevertheless emphasized the ideological legitimacy of communist participation in the

²⁶ “Communists Win 14 Seats in Assembly,” *Daily Worker*, February 19, 1936. As revealed in the title of the article, only a small minority of the approximately 250 deputies elected from the People's Bloc were Communists.

²⁷ “People's Front Wins,” *Daily Worker*, February 23, 1936.

People's Front, and of the advances being achieved by it. Shortly after the election the *Daily Worker* published a photo of a rally in Madrid in which each member of the gathered throng has his or her clenched fist raised in the anti-fascist salute. The image is titled, "Red Election Rally in Spain," and beneath it an article announces, "Spain Rejoices as People's Bloc Frees 30,000 Political Prisoners."²⁸ Shortly thereafter the paper reported that the new Spanish government would reestablish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, which had been severed by the right in 1933.²⁹ Subsequent pieces assured readers that "Spain's Left coalition ... continues to widen and press forward its victory against the reactionary cohorts" and that "fascist leaders are being rounded up and jailed as a result of a general strike in Madrid ... which compelled the government to act against the fascists."³⁰

Clearly eager to dispel any potential doubt among the movement's most ardent adherents regarding the consistency of communist policy, in May two dense and lengthy defenses of the People's Front strategy were published in the *Daily Worker*. In the context of Manuel Azaña, a non-Marxist Republican, assuming the Spanish presidency, the paper outlined the advances being made by the working class and argued against claims that its revolutionary aims were being compromised: "Forged by the Communist Party, welded by revolutionary youth and tempered by the heroes of the Asturian Soviets,

²⁸ "Red Election Rally in Spain" and "Spain Rejoices as People's Bloc Frees 30,000 Political Prisoners," *Daily Worker*, February 23, 1936.

²⁹ "Some New Spanish Customs," *Sunday Worker*, March 1, 1936.

³⁰ "Masses Push Demands in Spain," *Sunday Worker*, March 22, 1936; "Spain Moves Left," *Sunday Worker*, April 26, 1936.

the People's Front became a definite instrument for carrying on the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Spain, leading toward the Socialist Revolution."³¹ Commenting ten days later on the unification of the Socialist and Communist youth organizations, José Diaz, general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, published his assurance that "the proletariat and the working men of Spain are marching forward at a rapid pace on the path to organizational and political unity." Invoking the expression "proletarian internationalism," Diaz expressed confidence that the coalition strategy of "the Bolshevik Party" would lead to "victory for the revolution in Spain."³²

Emblematic of the strategy of soliciting support on the left for the Spanish government, while assuring activist communists of an ongoing commitment to revolutionary goals, is a "Letter from Spain," authored by José Diaz and published in the July 7 issue of *New Masses*, an influential weekly magazine closely aligned with the CPUSA but with an ideologically broader readership than the *Daily Worker*. Opening with the rhetorical question, "Why is there such a campaign of slander against the People's Front of Spain?" the author proceeds to summarize political events of the immediate past in support of his assertion that the People's Front is "the hope of a new Spain." He recounts the 1934 revocation of "all of the laws promulgated by the Republic which favored the interests of the workers and the poor people," the restoration of confiscated property to the land barons and of the state subsidy to the Church, and the

³¹ G. Marion, "Spanish Proletariat Does Not Deviate from Revolutionary Goal," *Daily Worker*, May 16, 1936.

³² Jose Diaz, "Spanish Masses Stride Forward to Political Unity in People's Bloc," *Daily Worker*, May 26, 1936.

repression of workers and leftists. Crediting the Communist Party with the innovation of anti-fascist unity, Diaz enumerates elements of the progressive agenda on which the coalition government was elected in February, asserting that “this program is a far cry from the ‘social revolution’ with which the Rightists are trying to scare the more moderate Republican camp, and to alienate certain democratic forces in other countries.” Although elimination of “the remnants of the middle ages” would seem a temperate goal, “the Rightists are obstinately bent on perpetuating” them, Diaz charges, by closing industrial plants and leaving land uncultivated “rather than give employment to the hungry thousands” and by planning assassinations of leftist leaders. While decrying efforts on the right to instill fear of “the specter of social revolution, of Bolshevism,” Diaz admits that “we Communists ... fight for a Workers’ and Peasants’ Government in Spain.” However, he affirms full support of the government and the determination “that our country shall cease to be a semi-feudal realm under the despotic control of an ancient nobility.”³³ It was to be on that basis that revolutionary Marxists and bourgeois republicans would join forces in defense of Spanish democracy.

Perhaps a more powerful means of instilling among American proletarian internationalists an allegiance to the Spanish Republic and a dedication to its protection was first-hand reporting of its achievements on behalf of those most in need. On May 27 the *Daily Worker* published such an “account of the agrarian revolution in Spain” by

³³ Jose Diaz, “Letter from Spain,” *New Masses*, July 7, 1936, 15-16.

Georges Soria of the French Communist Party newspaper, *L'Humanité*.³⁴ The June 16 issue of *New Masses* carried a piece by the Soviet-Jewish journalist Ilya Ehrenbourg titled, "Spain's Collective Farms." After painting a picture of the still-feudal recent past in the district of Toledo, the author presents the uplifting news of the beginnings of land reform there, noting that "there are thirty-five collective farms; 2,400 families began life anew. Before, they had neither land nor mules – not even a corner they could call their own. They worked for the counts and marquis. ... They paid them two or three pesetas a day – enough for watery soup with bread, rags and beds made of straw." Since their seizure of the estates, Ehrenbourg avers, the peasants were asked whether they preferred to divide the land or work it collectively; an overwhelming majority voted for the latter. One "dark-eyed youth from Malapica" reportedly described himself to Ehrenbourg as a "kolkhoznik," invoking the Russian word for Soviet collective farmers. The new regime had already brought a better life for the people: "The fields are serene. Sheep graze in the hills. The trees are budding. But," readers are instructed, "this is a surface tranquility. There is tension everywhere." The achievements of the People's Front were surviving tenuously in the shadow of an armed and violent revanchist landowning class against which the Spanish masses would need to defend themselves.³⁵

The shared identity of anti-fascist proletarian internationalists in the United States, which would be mobilized in the effort to aid the Spanish masses in their own defense, existed for many alongside a variety of other identities: Jewish, African

³⁴ Georges Soria, "60,000 Peasants Seize the Land," *Daily Worker*, May 27, 1936.

³⁵ Ilya Ehrenbourg, "Spain's Collective Farms," *New Masses*, June 16, 1936, 11–12.

American, female, and Catholic among them. Although the efforts of the American communist press to bolster the allegiances of segments of these groups to the international working-class movement would accelerate in the context of the war in Spain, the importance of what today is termed “identity politics” was evident well before it. The commitment of the CPUSA to the rights and interests of black Americans was longstanding.³⁶ And although coverage of the horrors of Italian fascist aggression in Ethiopia was of interest to all anti-imperialists in the United States, it had special resonance for African Americans. Referring to the significance of that war to all members of the diaspora, the *Daily Worker* declared, “In all parts of the world the African people have been roused to a renewed national consciousness, a stirring of revolt against their own imperialist oppressors, by Fascist Italy’s war on Ethiopia.”³⁷ The paper editorialized the following month on the importance of uniting communist and socialist workers in support of Ethiopia’s defense, and subsequent photos in its pages demonstrated graphically the devastation being wrought by fascist bombs.³⁸

As the foregoing demonstrates, readers of American communist publications – specifically the *Daily and Sunday Worker* and *New Masses* – were by the eve of the right-

³⁶ See, for example, Timothy Johnson, “‘Death for Negro Lynching!’ The Communist Party, USA’s Position on the African American Question,” *American Communist History* 7, no. 2 (December 2008): 243–54. By way of contrast, regarding the record of the Socialist Party on race, see Sally M. Miller, “For White Men Only: The Socialist Party of America and Issues of Gender, Ethnicity and Race,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 283–302.

³⁷ Elinor Burns, “Ethiopia’s Defense Arouses All African Negro People,” *Daily Worker*, February 11, 1936.

³⁸ “Aid to Ethiopia,” *Daily Worker*, March 3, 1936; “Peaceful Ethiopian Village Bombed by Fascists,” *Daily Worker*, April 1, 1936; “Mussolini’s Planes Shower Bombs on Ethiopia in Fascist Raids,” *Daily Worker*, April 13, 1936. Of note, that last photograph appeared directly above an article titled “Negro Surgeon Bares Harlem Hospital Abuses,” which was part of a series of pieces on the deplorable conditions of that hospital, which served what was at the time an almost entirely black community.

wing military rebellion in Spain immersed in a written culture of proletarian internationalism. During the era of the People's Front policy, the membership and, even more, the influence of the CPUSA reached levels far in excess of anything in its previous history. The messages imparted to this now-sizable community of working-class anti-fascists were stated and restated in various contexts and configurations and in aggregate were unmistakable in their conclusions: World-wide fascism was on the march and posed a grave threat to the aspirations of the proletariat, especially but not only by endangering the survival of the embodiment of those aspirations – the Soviet Union. The peril it represented necessitated a broad-based alliance of liberal and left forces to counter it. The People's Front was a revolutionary movement through which support of left-leaning bourgeois governments served the ultimate aims of the radical proletariat and the Soviet Union. Finally – and crucially, as would shortly become evident – Spain was the crucible in which the struggle against fascism by the masses to sustain their legally achieved governing power would determine whether the forces of progress had a future, not just in Spain, but in this world.

CHAPTER 4: REBELLION, WAR, AND PROLETARIAN INTERNATIONALIST RESPONSE

The recognition that political polarization and violence in Spain were escalating and that conditions were ripe for a *coup* attempt was shared by all who were following events there. That was as true of rank-and-file readers of the American communist press as it was of officials in the US State Department. A few days before the right-wing military *pronunciamento* that sparked civil war, the American ambassador in Spain reported to the secretary of state “that sensational developments during the past forty-eight hours have tended to aggravate the serious political situation already existing as the result of continued social and political unrest,” and then proceeded to describe to his boss rumors of an impending rebellion by “Right extremists.”¹ Four days later the ambassador wired Washington from San Sebastián, near the French border, to inform the secretary that a member of his staff in Madrid “telephones by special permission *coup d’état* planned for noon today. ... Will wire when information more definite.”² The first news seen by readers of the *Daily Worker* that a right-wing revolt had progressed from potential to actual was unwarrantedly optimistic in its conclusion. Over the dateline “Madrid, July 19” appeared the headline, “Spain Halts Fascist Coup.”³

¹ Ambassador in Spain (Bowers) to Secretary of State, July 14, 1936, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1936, Vol. II: Europe*, 437-39.

² Ambassador in Spain (Bowers) to Secretary of State, July 18, 1936, *FRUS, 1936, Vol. II: Europe*, 440.

³ “Spain Halts Fascist Coup,” *Sunday Worker*, July 19, 1936.

Beginning with such encouraging messages in the American communist press, this chapter will examine the period from the military insurrection of July 1936 through the arrival of the first units of the International Brigades in November of that year, signaling the overt internationalization of the war in Spain. It will continue to focus on the publications associated with the CPUSA as a means of understanding the ideological milieu in which members of the American proletarian internationalist community were steeped. Already primed to see events unfolding in Spain as highly consequential to their social class and political movement, events of the first several months of the war – and specifically their coverage in the communist press – solidified Spain as the central preoccupation of the American left. Building on the themes revealed and discussed in the previous chapter, CPUSA publications valorized the Spanish working class and its leadership in resisting the rebellion, while emphasizing the global stakes of the conflict. With the appearance of concrete Italian and German aid to the rebels, the non-intervention policies of the western democracies became a recurring target and logical premise of Comintern and CPUSA efforts to mobilize political and material support for the loyalist side. The military threat to Madrid, which became evident by mid-September, provided the dire context within which the party and its press coverage redoubled efforts to solidify American workers' allegiances to the anti-fascist cause and to broaden the scope of support for it. The foundation would thus be laid for the decisions of almost 3,000 Americans to risk their lives in defense of the Spanish Republic and the international proletarian community it came to represent.

The leaders of the military uprising, carried out on July 17 and 18 in Spanish Morocco and then in metropolitan Spain, had not anticipated the level of resistance that they encountered from the working class, and thus their path to power was not straightforward. Although regions of Spain historically associated with monarchism or with the Church lined up quickly with the rebels, support for the People's Front government was stronger in more industrialized areas. Thus, the *coup* collapsed in places such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Málaga, and Bilbao.⁴ The valor of those elements of Spanish society that resisted the insurrection, along with confidence in their ultimate success, was the message of the communist press to its readers in the early days of the civil war. Invoking the slogan "Victory or Death," reportedly adopted by supporters of the People's Front, *Daily Worker* foreign editor Harry Gannes asserted, "From a military viewpoint, everything points to the complete failure of the Fascist uprising."⁵ The following day credit for the rebellion's prematurely reported defeat was revealed in a headline: "Spanish Labor Unity Breaks Backbone of Military Coup."⁶

In a similar vein, the *New Masses* professed optimism in the face of "the long-drawn-out Rightist campaign of civil disturbance and economic sabotage [that] has ... culminated in a counter-revolutionary putsch." Labeling "the forward-looking elements" of society "the only effective barrier to fascism," the editorial closed with a tribute to the

⁴ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 99–115.

⁵ Harry Gannes, "Victory or Death Slogan is Raised by Popular Front," *Daily Worker*, July 20, 1936.

⁶ "Spanish Labor Unity Breaks Backbone of Military Coup," *Daily Worker*, July 21, 1936.

People's Front, whose "defense of the people" against fascism instantiated "the great lesson of our time: that the workers and their middle-class allies can by united action reap a bright future in a decaying world."⁷ As important as it was for the communist press to credit the People's Front coalition with the defense of the republic and of Spanish democracy, they wished to leave no doubt about the origin of the policy that led to its formation, or about the identity of the leadership of its efforts against fascism. A week into the rebellion, *Daily Worker* readers were introduced to *La Pasionaria* ("The Passionflower"), as Dolores Ibárruri, Communist member of the Cortes from Asturias and famously inspiring orator, was known. Before a crowd in Madrid she exhorted the people to "hold high your courage, as you did during the Asturias Revolution of October 1934." Warning against "the lies with which the Fascists wish to strike terror in the hearts of the workers," she assured her audience that "we have absolute control of the government" and closed with, "Long live the People's Front! Long live the Communist Party!"⁸ The following day the paper ran a lengthy profile of the miner's daughter who became more than any other single person the face and voice of the Spanish proletariat before the international working class.⁹ And the day after that, *La Pasionaria* was linked

⁷ "Spain Defends Democracy," *New Masses*, July 28, 1936, 6.

⁸ "La Pasionaria, Spanish Communist, Makes Fiery Appeal to Crush Reaction," *Daily Worker*, July 22, 1936.

⁹ "A Miner's Daughter Leads Embattled Workers of Spain," *Daily Worker*, July 23, 1936.

politically in an “intimate picture of revolutionary leaders” with José Diaz, general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party.¹⁰

The American communist press continued to portray the war in Spain in optimistic terms long after euphoria over the *coup*'s failure to capture control of the largest cities and the national government was giving way to recognition of the considerable military advantages enjoyed by the rebel forces. In that context, much of the coverage began to emphasize the conflict's significance outside of Spain. A brief editorial in the *Daily Worker* could not have been more explicit about what it saw as the stakes for American workers: “The Spanish people are fighting for their lives and their freedom – but in so doing they are fighting for the lives and freedom of us all.”¹¹ Two days later the paper's editorial both broadened and shaped the appeal in a way that would come to characterize a major thrust of CPUSA strategy. After excoriating “the American reactionary papers” – particularly those published by Hearst – for their tilt toward the rebels, the *Sunday Worker* assimilated the defense of the Spanish Republic to both proletarian socialist and bourgeois democratic revolutionary heritages: “The heroism of the Spanish masses ... will go down in history with all those great popular movements – such as the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the American Revolution of 1776 – which have given the common people freedom and independence.”¹² And just as the Spanish

¹⁰ I. Sylvia, “Courage of Diaz and Pasionaria, Spanish Communists, Seen as Epic,” *Daily Worker*, July 24, 1936.

¹¹ “Fighting for Us,” *Daily Worker*, July 24, 1936.

¹² “Tested in Battle,” *Sunday Worker*, July 26, 1936. As described by Dominic Tierney, in *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle That Divided America* (Durham: Duke

loyalists should be embraced as Iberian incarnations of Russian and American revolutionaries, defeat of their enemies would strike a blow against reaction at home: “For us a Spanish People’s Front victory means an improved position against our own Hearst-Landon-Liberty League-Morgan-duPont Fascists.”¹³

Although the American right would continue to be characterized as “fascist,” the American communist press devoted increasing attention to the more immediate threat of overt fascists and Nazis and the considerable resources being deployed by the Italian and German governments. The US secretary of state was informed of Rome’s deep geopolitical interest in Spain by his *chargé d’affaires* there. The diplomat indicated that “Italian officials are outspoken in their concern over the situation in Spain,” and in particular over “a very real threat of Bolshevism in the West” and the “constantly growing threat to the social order in Europe” that implied. In a separate telegram a week later he reported to Washington that “in the highest official circles here [Rome] the present conflict in Spain has been characterized as the crystallization of the opposition between the two main forces in Europe, namely, Fascism and Bolshevism.”¹⁴ As concrete evidence mounted that the rebel forces were being supplied by Italy and Germany, discourse reflected the recognition that the “civil war” in Spain was rapidly becoming an

University Press, 2007), 58, the Hearst and Catholic press sympathized with the rebels while liberal newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Chicago Daily News*, and magazines such as *Harper’s* and the *New Yorker*, sided with the republic.

¹³ “Support Spanish People,” *Daily Worker*, July 27, 1936.

¹⁴ Charge in Italy (Kirk) to Secretary of State, July 25 and August 1, 1936, *FRUS, 1936, Vol. II: Europe*, 447, 453-54.

international struggle, with commensurably heightened stakes.¹⁵ In that context, although communist publications would continue to argue that People's Front anti-fascism was not an abdication of revolutionary Marxism, the *Daily Worker* editorialized – in contradistinction with the formulation of the Italian government reported above – that “the issue in Spain is *not* that of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat against Fascism. It is the issue of the will of the majority of the people for a democratic Republic.” The piece closed with an exhortation to leadership by the left of a broad movement: “Our task is to rally the American people on the side of democracy in Spain, on the side of the preservation of world peace. There is not much time to lose. ACT!”¹⁶ The party's instructions would soon become more specific.

The international implications of the war in Spain were widely recognized by commentators from early on. A political cartoon in the *Daily Worker* of August 10 depicted “The Spanish Bull” as a costume, the front half of which was inhabited by Hitler, with Mussolini filling out the rear (Figure 1). Roger Abbott of the *New Masses* warned that “a fascist victory” would not only entail misery for the Spanish people but would “render Spain a base of operations for German and Italian fascism, anxious to encircle the France of the People's Front, and to goad Europe into a sanguinary war whose monstrous consequences would eventually roll across every country in the world,

¹⁵ For an early report, based on information published in French, British, and Soviet newspapers, on foreign fascist intervention, see “Spanish Fascists Given Planes by Nazis and Italians,” *Daily Worker*, July 28, 1936.

¹⁶ “Act Now to Stop Hitler-Mussolini Intervention in Spain,” *Daily Worker*, August 5, 1936 (emphasis added in first quoted passage).

including our own.”¹⁷ An editorial in the same issue asserted that “the second world war must be prevented” and demanded “that the government of the United States ... should act before it is too late. It should join the powers seeking to preserve peace through collective security.”¹⁸ Readers of the magazine would have recognized that “collective security” in this context referred to Stalin’s quest for defense agreements between the Soviet Union and the western democracies. Although a Franco-Soviet pact had been signed in May 1935, a broader anti-fascist alliance that included Great Britain was not achieved.¹⁹ More relevant here is that aid for the Spanish Republic would not be forthcoming from the western democracies, and the asymmetry between the warring sides in Spain that engendered became a major issue for Soviet foreign policy, the Comintern, and the international proletarian community.

¹⁷ Roger Abbott, “Who Backed the Spanish Revolt?,” *New Masses*, August 11, 1936.

¹⁸ “Spain the Tinder-Box,” *New Masses*, August 11, 1936.

¹⁹ Fridrikh I. Firsov, Harvey Klehr, and John Earl Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 55.



Figure 1: The international implications of the war in Spain, and specifically the relationship between the rebel side and the fascist governments of Europe, were important themes of coverage in the communist press from the beginning. (Daily Worker, August 10, 1936. Reproduced with permission, Tamiment Library, New York University.)

As discussed in Chapter 2, the People's Front policy of the Comintern was first applied in France and Socialist Premier Léon Blum, head of the liberal-left government there, clearly wished to aid his sister government in Spain. At a cabinet meeting in Paris on August 1, Blum argued that France not only had an obligation to extend help to the Spanish Republic, but that it was also in its self-interest. It was at that point, however, already evident that the more conservative British government would not follow suit and would not back France should a general war result from its intervention in Spain. In that circumstance the more cautious members of the French cabinet prevailed in obstructing

any significant military assistance to Madrid. Instead, a policy of “non-intervention” was proposed by the French government. The Italians and Germans, already by that time arming the rebels, prevaricated, but by August 21, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy had all ostensibly agreed to refrain from intervention in the Spanish Civil War. At a meeting of the Socialist Federation of the Seine on September 6, Blum justified to an initially hostile crowd his government’s actions: “I know you want arms for the Spanish Government. But if we send them other countries will help the rebels. ... What would be the result of an arms race in Spain? ... Non-intervention has probably already avoided a European war.”²⁰ The meaninglessness of agreements with Mussolini and Hitler had not yet become evident to all, but the sham of “non-intervention” would soon become a fixture of the proletarian internationalist narrative.

The Soviet position on non-intervention was complicated. As noted in Chapter 2, Stalin recognized that Soviet security could be affected adversely by *either* creation of another fascist foothold in Europe *or* by establishment of a revolutionary regime on the Iberian Peninsula that would frighten mainstream western public opinion and thereby damage prospects for a broad international anti-fascist alliance. The solution to that dilemma would entail the USSR remaining a vocal supporter of the People’s Front government, agreeing to the French non-intervention proposal, sending humanitarian aid to Spain, and – only after it became evident that Italy and Germany were violating the agreement – supplying the loyalists with arms, though not nearly to the extent that the

²⁰ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 136–37; Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 41–48 (quote on 48).

fascist powers were aiding the rebels.²¹ Most importantly, the Comintern was charged with rallying members of the international proletarian community to the cause of the Spanish Republic in increasingly concrete ways. As early as August 11 the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern sought pilots for service in Spain. In a cipher message from Moscow, CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder was advised, “The governmental army in Spain is in a great want of aviators. If you have aviators who sympathize with the Party, necessary urgently to send them to Spain.”²² Soon, communist parties would be expected to supply recruits for a Comintern army to fight in Spain. Membership in the community of international proletarian anti-fascists demanded great commitment and, for many, it would come to entail great sacrifice.

Not coincidentally, the attention paid by the Comintern to Spain was shared by the CPUSA. Included in the August 13 meeting of its Politburo was a discussion of the policy it would pursue. The conclusions of that deliberation contained two parts, the first of which related to the demands the party was to make on the Roosevelt administration. It should emphasize that the government in Madrid was “legitimately established, . . . democratic, and friendly” to the United States, and that it was “engaged in suppressing an insurrection by fascist, monarchist elements.” Moreover, “the attempted intervention by Hitler and Mussolini are [*sic*] not only giving aid to the rebels in Spain against a friendly government but may also result in strengthening these two powers for the outbreak of a world war which they are preparing.” Therefore, “since the United States is vitally

²¹ Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*, 48–52.

²² Firsov, Klehr, and Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943*, 86.

interested in seeing that the manoeuvres of Hitler and Mussolini do not succeed,” the party called upon the president “to check and prevent these war makers from carrying out their plan.” The Politburo went on to insist that the US government “throw the full weight of this country on the side of the people and against the attempts of Germany and Italy in Spain,” but stopped short of specifying the form such a policy should take.²³

The second prong of the party’s initiative on Spain related to “the question of independent action of the workers,” asserting that such action must express “moral and political sympathy with the Spanish people against the reactionaries and fascists and rendering all support, exerting all possible pressure on Roosevelt.” It went on to instruct the party “to attempt to organize demonstrations immediately in front of the Italian and German Embassies [*sic*] throughout the country protesting their intervention and mobiliz[ing] the masses in support of peace and for the democratic government in Spain.”²⁴ The following day, under the headline, “United States Must Not Aid Fascist Mutineers Against Democratic, Friendly Spain,” a lengthy *Daily Worker* editorial urged its readers that “great mass demonstrations of protest before the German Nazi and Italian fascist consulates must answer the Hitler-Mussolini intervention in Spain.” “Stop the brutal attack on Spanish democracy!” it insisted, and “Halt the war planes of the fascist plotters against the peace of the world!” Demanding that the administration “place the full weight of this country’s influence in opposition to the German Nazi and Italian

²³ Meeting Minutes, Politburo of the Communist Party of the USA, August 13, 1936, Reel 303, Delo 3976, Files of the CPUSA in the Comintern Archives, Tamiment Library, New York University.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

fascist intervention in Spain,” the paper presented to the American communist community the policy, and nearly *verbatim* language, adopted by their party.²⁵

Further discussion at the August 13 CPUSA Politburo meeting revealed the governing body’s determination to increase the visibility of the party’s campaign on behalf of the Spanish loyalists. The complaint of a “lack of activities in support of the struggle of the Spanish masses” was tied to the astonishing assertion of a “lack of much news [on Spain] in the DW [*Daily Worker*].” In response to “a tremendous amount of demands for greater activity than have been carried through so far,” the Politburo was informed that members of the party were “trying to get Madison Square Garden for next Wednesday night, with perhaps Comrade H. speaking.”²⁶ Five days after the Politburo meeting, a *Daily Worker* headline enjoined readers to “Pack Garden Rally Tonight for Spanish People’s Front,” noting that the paper’s editor, Clarence Hathaway (presumably “Comrade H.”), would be there to “analyze the problems of the civil war in Spain.” That piece shared the page with three news articles on the war in Spain, along with an editorial whose title pleaded for readers to “Aid Spanish People to Save Democracy and World Peace” and whose text asked them, “What are you doing, comrades and friends, to help save Spanish democracy? What are you doing to aid these heroic fighters, on the plains

²⁵ “United States Must Not Aid Fascist Mutineers Against Democratic, Friendly Spain,” *Daily Worker*, August 14, 1936.

²⁶ Meeting Minutes, Politburo of the CPUSA, August 13, 1936, Files of the CPUSA in the Comintern Archives.

and in the hills of Spain?”²⁷ One may reasonably conclude that no one in New York or Moscow complained that the struggle in Spain was being ignored that day.

Throughout the war the overt pleas for aid to Spain emanating from the CPUSA largely related to funds and non-military supplies. The communist press frequently carried reports of fund-raising events and donations by labor unions and other organizations, holding up as models those sectors of the proletarian community that were doing their parts in the international struggle. An early example appeared on August 13 under the headline, “Groups Rush Funds to Aid Spanish People.” The article proclaimed that “support for the Spanish people in their fight against fascism continued to roll in both in word and deed yesterday.” Among the organizations lauded were the Grocery, Dairy and Fruit Clerks union, whose executive committee voted a \$5,000 donation to “the Spanish anti-fascists,” as well as Locals 144 and 21 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. The piece closed by informing readers that “the Hospital Employees Union, local 171 of the Building Service Employees International Union, today announced that one of their most poorly paid members had contributed \$25 to aid the People’s Front of Spain.”²⁸ The message of international working-class solidarity being both a high moral virtue and an expectation of the community was clear.

²⁷ “Pack Garden Rally Tonight for Spanish People's Front,” “Spain Miners Reinforced in Fierce Assault on Oviedo Garrison,” “United Front to Aid Spain,” “People's Front Victory Urged,” “Aid Spanish People to Save Democracy,” *Daily Worker*, August 18, 1936.

²⁸ “Groups Rush Funds to Aid Spanish People,” *Daily Worker*, August 13, 1936.

It was also evident that much more would be needed to save the Spanish Republic from the powerful and well financed coalition of reactionary Spaniards and foreigners arrayed against it. The *Daily Worker* editorialized that “support for the People’s Front has not been as speedy and as large as the situation requires. The enemies of democracy in Spain must be met by the friends of democracy around the world! Material support must not fail to come!” That plea was coupled to the observation that the non-intervention policy proposed by the French and about to be formalized among the European powers was detrimental to the republican cause: “Neutrality is turning out to be an economic blockade against the People’s Front and underhand aid to the Spanish Fascists. ... The chief need of the hour is to rally all possible forces ... AGAINST FASCIST INTERVENTION and to BREAK THE ECONOMIC BLOCKADE against the Spanish People’s Front.”²⁹ The American embargo on the sale of arms to Spain that was introduced in 1936 would persist for the duration of the war, despite the efforts of the working-class left, in conjunction with those of liberals and intellectuals, to have it lifted. Prior to the neutrality legislation of 1937, which extended coverage of prior neutrality laws to include civil wars, the arms embargo was a “moral” and not a legal one. It reflected widespread isolationist sentiment in the United States, even among those whose sympathies were with the republicans in Spain.³⁰ The disastrous effects for the loyalist side of the asymmetrically implemented international non-intervention agreement were among the protracted refrains of the communist press.

²⁹ “Rally Forces to Break Economic Blockade Against Spanish People,” *Daily Worker*, August 19, 1936 (emphasis in original).

³⁰ Tierney, *FDR and the Spanish Civil War*, 46–52.

On August 25 readers of the *Daily Worker* learned of Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov's "whole-hearted support of the French Government's efforts to save European peace." On the previous day he had signed an agreement to refrain from exporting war materials to Spain in the context of German and Italian indications of their willingness to do likewise.³¹ Four days later, however, an editorial contended, "In the Spanish situation we cannot be 'neutral.' ... Hitler and Mussolini are NOT neutral. They talk of an 'embargo' on arms to Spain – but continue to furnish such arms and ammunition to the fascist mutineers." Returning to the message determined by the Politburo earlier in the month, the paper decried the attempts of "the international gangsters" – among whom they counted Hearst along with Hitler and Mussolini – to "terrorize the world." It asserted that "the American people will not be terrorized. From their ranks comes this demand on Roosevelt: 'Break the blockade against the Spanish government! Help the Spanish democracy!'"³² A couple weeks later, American communists were assured that their counterparts in France had drawn the same conclusion. The editor of *L'Humanité* was quoted in a *Sunday Worker* editorial as having declared, "It is false to pose the dilemma of 'neutrality or war.' The blockade of Spain's regular government, when fascist powers are aiding the rebellion, itself constitutes

³¹ "Soviet Diplomat Signs Pact for Neutrality in Spain," *Daily Worker*, August 25, 1936.

³² "Spain is 'Our Business,'" *Daily Worker*, August 29, 1936 (emphasis in original).

intervention against a friendly republic.”³³ And later that week the *Daily Worker* insisted, simply, “Away with the fiction of ‘neutrality’! Away with this fraud!”³⁴

Members of the radical proletarian community were thus reminded repeatedly that in Spain – as in so many other arenas over the lifespan of the international workers’ movement – their struggle was not a fair one. That argument was no less emotional for being founded on facts. A good deal of the coverage of Spain in the communist press kindled and nurtured ties between readers and their presumed counterparts in Spain. An editorial insisted that “the fight in Spain is crucial for the labor movement of the entire world” as “the fascist rebels have already declared [that] they intend to do what the fascists in Germany, Italy and Austria have done: smash the trade unions.”³⁵ The *Daily Worker* made clear that the cause of Spain was a family affair, with considerable attention paid to it on the “women’s page” and eventually in the section designed for children. “When the daily papers arrive the kids of Camp Meadowbrook get excited,” despite the fact that “not that many of them can read,” a mid-August article reports. “‘What’s the latest news from Spain?’ they want to know. ‘Are the fascists from Italy and Germany still sending planes to kill the Spanish workers?’” they purportedly ask. The piece goes on to print letters from the campers about their fund-raising project for the Spanish cause, one of which is reproduced in the handwriting of its young author, Naomi Docker. It begins, “Dear Comrades and fellow workers,” and proceeds with an inspiring

³³ “Airplanes for Spain!,” *Sunday Worker*, September 13, 1936.

³⁴ “Halt the Nazi War on the Spanish People!,” *Daily Worker*, September 16, 1936.

³⁵ “Speed Aid to Spain,” *Daily Worker*, August 10, 1936.

message: “I hope you are gaining ground and that there will be a soviet spain. We have ten dollars from selling leminade and cholit. We give it to you for your freedom. I hope you win the dirty fashists.” She signs it “an amarican comrade.”³⁶

Among the most effective means of engendering a sense of immediacy employed by the communist press was the increasingly frequent appearance of eyewitness accounts. A Sunday feature titled, “Murder – Behind the Red Cross” recounted the treachery of a contingent of rebel fighters in the words of villagers who witnessed it: “The fascists rode into town in trucks, bearing the Red Cross Emblem ... suddenly the sides dropped down and machine guns began to spray bullets in all directions.”³⁷ Several days later, beneath a photo of a column of militiamen and women with their fists raised in the anti-fascist salute, reportedly just before they left for the Somosierra Front, a lengthy piece emphasized the political commitment, courage, resolve, and human likeability of the workers-cum-soldiers the reporter had accompanied before mailing his dispatch back to New York more than two weeks previously.³⁸ American workers were also from time to time given glimpses of the war as seen through the eyes of Spanish loyalist journalists. On September 20, Sunday readers received a sampling from three different Spanish writers, compiled and translated by the veteran CPUSA leader Harrison George. They appeared on the same page as an image of a man, in front of farm animals, with a rifle

³⁶ Martha Campion, “From U.S. Kids to Spanish Workers,” *Daily Worker*, August 17, 1936 (reproduced as in original).

³⁷ Pierre Van Paassen, “Murder -- Behind the Red Cross,” *Sunday Worker*, August 30, 1936

³⁸ J. E. Pouterman, “At the Somosierra Front,” *Daily Worker*, September 3, 1936.

slung over one shoulder and the opposite fist raised in salute. The caption reads, “A peasant guards his sheep – and the Republic.”³⁹

By the fall of 1936, the CPUSA and its allied organizations had expanded the number of venues in which they published written materials on the situation in Spain. Pamphlets, whose numbers would proliferate the following year, provided readers information in a format that allowed greater breadth of coverage than individual newspaper or magazine articles but was nevertheless convenient and easy to read. Among the first such productions reported the findings of a September visit to Spain by an “International Youth Commission” that represented a number of leftist organizations in the United States, Canada, and Cuba. The tone of the document was set early by its description of arrival in Spain from France on foot, via a railroad tunnel through the foothills of the Pyrenees: “Coming out of the tunnel into the Spanish sunlight made us feel that we were being born again.” The pamphlet briefly summarized the history of Spanish politics and the war and outlined the components of the People’s Front. Finding confidence and high morale among the people, the author enthused that “no adjectives are needed to describe the courage and conviction which hold them together against the rebels when one realizes the terrific technical odds against them.” If those odds were to be overcome, it would be attributable in no small measure to the unity of young people. Asked, “What is the most important thing young people in each country can do for the cause of democracy?” the leader of the Spanish Socialist Youth organization replied,

³⁹ Harrison George, trans., “Scenes of Spain,” *Sunday Worker*, September 20, 1936.

“without hesitation, ‘Unite!’” That message was translated into the pamphlet’s conclusion that it was “the responsibility of all the young people in the world to stand together and act with strength in behalf of [the] ideals we cherish.”⁴⁰

The tone of the communist press began to change by late September. Although the themes of its coverage of Spain described above – including professed optimism at ultimate victory despite a decidedly uneven playing field – continued, a sense of urgency became ever more evident. With the rebel forces under Franco advancing toward Talavera de la Reina, the only significant town standing between them and Madrid, the *Sunday Worker* warned in a headline, “Decisive Fight Looms Near Talavera Area.”⁴¹ An editorial on the same day was titled, “They Shall Not Pass!,” invoking the rallying cry of *La Pasionaria* (“¡No Pasarán!”) that became one of the most recognizable and frequently repeated slogans of the loyalist side. The article asserted that “the civil war in Spain is rapidly approaching a turning point,” adding that “the Spanish masses ... are fighting valiantly but they need our help, the help of every man or woman who values peace and democracy.”⁴² A week later, on the day Franco’s forces relieved the loyalist siege of the Alcázar fortress in Toledo, the *Sunday Worker* identified, in the title of an editorial, a “Critical Period Ahead,” as Madrid prepared to be defended by a People’s Army against

⁴⁰ Joseph Cadden, *Spain 1936: Findings of an International Youth Commission* (New York: International Youth Commission, 1936).

⁴¹ Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 163; “Decisive Fight Looms Near Talavera Area,” *Sunday Worker*, September 20, 1936.

⁴² “They Shall Not Pass!,” *Sunday Worker*, September 20, 1936.

“the fascist legions, merciless hordes of Moorish tribesmen and cut-throat Legionnaires.”⁴³

As the defense of Madrid loomed and incontrovertible evidence accumulated that the Italians and Germans were aiding the rebel forces and that their interventions could well prove decisive, on September 29 the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union approved significant military assistance to the Spanish loyalists. The vessel *Komsomol* departed Odessa with a cargo of heavy weapons that arrived in Cartagena on October 15.⁴⁴ In a *New Masses* article published while the *Komsomol* was en route to Spain, British writer John Strachey justified earlier Soviet agreement to the French non-intervention proposal on the grounds that “Soviet leaders are guardians of the first socialist economic system which has ever existed in human history; as such they carry an enormous responsibility upon their shoulders,” adding, “To endanger that system lightly would be a crime.” Nevertheless – continuing to conflate international proletarian and Soviet interests – he went on to assert that “the safety of socialism in the Soviet Union itself demands that fascism should not be allowed to destroy all of the Soviet Union’s allies,” and identified the duty of the Moscow government to “keep the sword erect” as “the hour of decision is approaching very rapidly.”⁴⁵ As introduced above, however, the centerpiece of Stalin’s strategy for Spain was a worldwide proletarian campaign on behalf of the republic, orchestrated by the Comintern and its constituent parties and

⁴³ “Critical Period Ahead,” *Sunday Worker*, September 27, 1936.

⁴⁴ Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 150.

⁴⁵ John Strachey, “Spain and History,” *New Masses*, October 13, 1936, 5.

designed to prioritize Soviet interests and implement Soviet directives. Although Moscow supplied over eight hundred planes and four hundred tanks to the cause of the Spanish government, the face of its intervention would be international, not Russian.⁴⁶

Pursuant to instructions from the Soviet Politburo, in early October the Secretariat of the Comintern Executive Committee ordered communist parties to engage “in the recruitment of volunteers with military training among the workers of various countries, in order to send them to Spain.” Later that month CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder was directed to organize recruitment of volunteers and supplies of weapons from the United States, and to solicit help from communist parties in Latin America.⁴⁷ Although the American radical working-class community was already well informed about and emotionally involved in the cause of Republican Spain, the defense of Madrid, in the context of new Comintern and CPUSA expectations, would prompt intensified coverage in the communist press. A September 30 piece in the *Daily Worker* asked, “Will Madrid be the Spanish Verdun, or will it share the fate of the Paris Commune?”⁴⁸ Both the heroism and the working-class identities of its defenders were frequently invoked, in pointed contrast to the perfidious and foreign-backed fascist attackers.⁴⁹ Readers of the *Daily Worker* learned that, although the Emergency Defense Committee in Madrid had declared a “state of siege” the previous day, the Spanish capital was swept with a “do or

⁴⁶ Tierney, *FDR and the Spanish Civil War*, 21.

⁴⁷ Firsov, Klehr, and Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943*, 86, 88 (quote on 86).

⁴⁸ Michael Koltzov, “Madrid Girds for its Verdun,” *Daily Worker*, September 30, 1936.

⁴⁹ For example, “Workers Determined on Fight to Finish,” *Sunday Worker*, October 4, 1936.

die spirit.” The same issue carried a report of a demonstration in New York’s Union Square in support of the Spanish people and against the US neutrality policy, as well as a political cartoon depicting a worker wielding a hammer while German and Italian warplanes drop bombs on “neutrality” (Figure 2).



Figure 2: With German and Italian intervention revealing neutrality policies to be a sham, workers were implored to support their imperiled counterparts in Spain. (Daily Worker, October 10, 1936. Reproduced with permission, Tamiment Library, New York University.)

Being informed about the struggle of the Spanish people, as well as its historical background and future implications, was an expectation of members of the American proletarian community. An entire page of the *Sunday Worker* of October 11 was devoted to a test for readers: “What Do You Know About Spain?” They were instructed that events there were “of vital concern not only to all Europe, but to America, to YOU,” and asked, “Are you fully equipped to take part in these discussions [of the war in Spain], to explain it to others who do not know or have the wrong information about it?” The right-

hand column of the page contained fifteen questions by which readers could test their knowledge, many of which were as declarative as they were interrogative. One of them, for example, asked, “What confidential document published by the London News Chronicle on August 18, 1936, proved that the Nazis had a vast network of terrorist and espionage organizations in Spain?” Rather than supplying the correct responses to the questions, the key at the bottom indicated the page numbers in the book *Spain in Revolt*, authored by two foreign editors of the *Daily Worker*, on which the answers could be found. And, conveniently, a cut-out coupon on the bottom of the page allowed readers who mailed it in with two dollars to receive both the book and a six-month subscription to the *Sunday Worker*. That issue also contained, on the “women’s page,” the winning letter in the paper’s “great anti-war contest.” Phoebe Ray’s successful entry implored, “We must organize every woman, every man, every child for the fight against war and fascism. . . . We shall organize into a strong and mighty army, that the enemy should fear our power. We must start it now!” Included among the venues in which readers were exhorted to warn their friends and neighbors of the fascist menace was the grocery store.⁵⁰

No reader of the communist press could have been unaware of, or unconcerned about, the impending battle for Madrid. In the October 27 issue of the *New Masses*, Young Communist League leader Gil Green compared this anticipated turning point of the war to a milestone of American history: “Spain faces its Gettysburg. If the masses of

⁵⁰ “A Test for Sunday Worker Readers!,” “Here’s the Prize Letter,” *Sunday Worker*, October 11, 1936.

the world come to its defense with every form of material aid, the Spanish toilers will win their victory over fascism. The question before every self-conscious worker and intellectual, before every lover of liberty and freedom, is to come to the aid of the Spanish people. ... We must not fail!”⁵¹ Several days previously readers of the *Daily Worker* were informed of an upcoming appearance at Madison Square Garden of three Spanish representatives of the loyalist cause – a Catholic priest, a leader of the Left Republican Party, and a woman member of the Cortes – who would tell “the story of the epic struggle of the Spanish masses against the mad-dogs of fascism.” A brief appeal for recruitment of new members to the Communist Party, appearing in that same issue, was emotively headed, “Spain Speaks to You.”⁵² And the following day, Earl Browder spoke to a national radio audience on “The American People and Spain.”⁵³ Communist leadership of the movement to save the Spanish Republic was now unmistakable.

Browder contended that “it is the duty of every American worker and progressive to help the Spanish people defeat the fascist invasion.” In a foreshadowing of the party’s strategy for the remainder of the war, the general secretary and presidential candidate emphasized themes of the loyalist cause with which most Americans – and certainly all liberals and progressives – would agree.⁵⁴ Three nights following Browder’s address an estimated 20,000 people packed Madison Square Garden where they reportedly cheered

⁵¹ Gil Green, “Spain at Gettysburg,” *New Masses*, October 27, 1936, 8.

⁵² “Delegates Here to Tell of Struggle in Spain,” “Spain Speaks to You,” *Daily Worker*, October 22, 1936.

⁵³ Earl Browder, “The American People and Spain,” *Daily Worker*, October 24, 1936 (broadcast the previous day on NBC radio).

⁵⁴ “Aid to Spanish People, Browder Urges in Radio Plea to Nation,” *Daily Worker*, October 24, 1936.

the representatives of the republican side who spoke there; impressive photos from the rally showing the throng and the speakers appeared in the paper on October 29.⁵⁵ And on the day following the Madison Square Garden mass meeting, Spanish Premier Francisco Largo Caballero's direct plea for aid from America was published in the *Daily Worker*. In an emotional message the leader of the left-wing faction of the Socialist Party spoke both to the radical proletarian and broader progressive communities: "I appeal to your working-class solidarity. I appeal to the instincts of freedom in the great American people. I appeal to your hearts and to your hands. Believe in us. Have faith in us. We are your brothers." Invoking an expression that would be repeated by proletarian internationalists countless times over the coming two years, the Spanish leader entreated, "Make Madrid the tomb of fascism."⁵⁶

The task of assembling and leading an effective movement in support of the loyalist cause weighed on the CPUSA. Despite the quantity of information already being published on the situation in Spain, members of the Politburo expressed at their October 30 meeting that they "have not brought enough material into the press." With respect to "the building up of a broad mass movement ... [h]ere we have the beginning in the meeting of New York at the Garden and the tour, which is being developed throughout the country by the representatives who came from Spain." But much more work remained, and "it will be the Party which will have to do much of [it], building up the

⁵⁵ "20,000 at Rally for Spain," *Daily Worker*, October 27, 1936; "Where Thousands Rallied to Aid Spain," *Daily Worker*, October 29, 1936.

⁵⁶ Largo Caballero, "Caballero Asks Americans Aid Defend Spain," *Daily Worker*, October 27, 1936.

meetings, setting up the necessary broad committee, etc.” In addition to the considerable organizational work they faced, members of the Politburo also identified several obstacles to their success on this project. Broadening the coalition of anti-fascist activists would entail concerted appeals to demographic groups that had been underrepresented in their movement. Foremost among these were Catholics. As discussed above, anti-clericalism was a long-time staple of the Spanish left and the American Catholic press emphasized in its coverage the church burnings, rape of nuns, and killing of priests that had occurred in the republican zone. Moreover, depiction of the war as a consequence of an international Bolshevick conspiracy augmented the anti-communism already espoused by many Catholics. To counter such sentiment the Politburo called for appeals to be “issued to the Catholic masses directly.”⁵⁷

During the previous month, in an apparent concession to People’s Front comity, the front page of the *Daily Worker* softened the explicitness of the newspaper’s partisan affiliation. Under the name of the paper had long been the phrase, “Central Organ Communist Party U.S.A. (Section of Communist International),” and the universally recognizable hammer-and-sickle logo was featured prominently between the words “Daily” and “Worker.” On September 21, however, the front page subtitle became “Peoples Champion of Liberty, Progress, Peace and Prosperity” and the hammer and sickle disappeared (but remained, albeit in smaller font, on the masthead of the editorial page). The vaunted atheism of communist ideology likewise gave way to the practical

⁵⁷ Meeting Minutes, Politburo of the CPUSA, October 30, 1936, Files of the CPUSA in the Comintern Archives; Tierney, *FDR and the Spanish Civil War*, 61–62.

need of the party to court the considerable population of American working-class Catholics. Decrying “fake stories of ‘Red atrocities against the Catholic Church in Spain’” that were running in conservative papers in Europe and America, the *Sunday Worker* distinguished the “high dignitaries of [the] church, backed by their master at the Vatican, [who] are working hand in glove with fascist butchers to slaughter Spain’s people” from “true Catholics in Spain [who] are fighting for the People’s Front and giving their lives to defend Democracy.” Recognizing that Catholic readers might be hesitant to accept the theological pronouncements of communist editorial writers, the piece’s author closed with a quote from Father Luis Sarasola’s speech at Madison Square Garden two weeks previously: “We are struggling to maintain the legal government of the nation because this is the duty of all citizens and of all Catholics.”⁵⁸

That struggle was reaching a crescendo. By the first of November rebel troops had advanced as far as the western and southern outskirts of Madrid, and would soon be reinforced by the German Condor Legion, eager to test in battle its advanced weaponry. On November 6 the government of the republic moved to Valencia, much further from the battle lines, leaving General José Miaja and the *Junta de Defensa* (Defense Council) in charge of Madrid’s protection.⁵⁹ The desperation of the situation was evident in the succinct and insistent *Daily Worker* editorial of November 9, which began dramatically: “Heroic Madrid is desperately but stubbornly holding out against the fascist hordes who have sworn to make the streets run with rivers of blood of the city’s defenders.”

⁵⁸ “True Catholics in Spain Fight for Democracy,” *Sunday Worker*, November 8, 1936.

⁵⁹ Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 164.

Nevertheless, readers were assured, the Spanish people remained “determined to be victorious in this battle for democracy and for world peace.” That outcome, however, would depend on the responses of members of the international proletarian community: “Your help must go to embattled Spain! ... Support the Soviet Union’s great efforts to smash down the ‘neutrality’ farce. ... The fact that the people of Spain are giving their life’s blood to defend democracy must be our main concern. Communists, Socialists, trade union members, liberals, progressives, in every organization – unite your ranks to help Spain NOW!”⁶⁰

Help – and not only of the material sort – from the international working class was in fact arriving, albeit not yet in significant quantity from the United States. The first units of the Comintern-sponsored International Brigades (IBs) arrived in Madrid on November 8. Initially taken by the Spaniards who greeted their arrival with shouts of “¡Salud!, ¡Salud!” to be Russians, that first contingent was largely composed of French, German, and Italian anti-fascists.⁶¹ By the time the IBs were withdrawn in late 1938, approximately 35,000 volunteers from fifty-three different countries had served the loyalist side.⁶² Responsibility for coordinating recruitment fell to the leaders of the French Communist Party, and roughly a quarter of the membership of the IBs was of

⁶⁰ “People of Spain Need Your Aid,” *Daily Worker*, November 9, 1936 (emphasis in original).

⁶¹ Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 175–76.

⁶² Verle B. Johnston, *Legions of Babel: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 88.

French origin.⁶³ In its valorization of the defense of Madrid, the *Sunday Worker*'s mention of the "new International Volunteers consisting of the Rome Battalion . . . , the Paris Battalion . . . , and the Thaelmann Battalion" was scant.⁶⁴ Soon, however, the heroism and selfless dedication of the global army that answered the call of its political party and social class would be legendary. By the start of the final week of November the rebel assault on Madrid was exhausted and the city remained in republican hands.⁶⁵ The gruesome war of which it was part, however, continued. And nearly 3,000 American radical proletarian internationalists – who had been immersed in a political world in which the war in Spain was for months on end the paramount topic of the time – would shortly embark on their quest to steer its outcome.

⁶³ Firsov, Klehr, and Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943*, 88; Johnston, *Legions of Babel*, 88.

⁶⁴ "Fascists Recognize Franco!," *Sunday Worker*, November 22, 1936.

⁶⁵ Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 177.

CHAPTER 5: CIVIL WAR TO INTERNATIONAL WAR AND AMERICAN PROLETARIAN COMMITMENT

The arrival of the International Brigades in Madrid marked a turning point – both militarily and psychologically – of the war. Not only would the rebel fight for Spain’s largest cities and seat of government be far more protracted than observers thought, and loyalists feared, during the fall of 1936; what had been at least putatively a civil war was now an unabashedly international one. Evidence of increasingly concerted German, Italian, and Portuguese intervention had, of course, existed for months, in blatant contravention of the non-intervention agreement among the European powers. In addition, some foreigners had enlisted in the various militias organized by Marxist, anarchist, and republican groups immediately following the start of hostilities. Many of those volunteers were political refugees from fascist countries, and some had come to Barcelona to participate in the People’s Olympiad – an alternative to the games taking place in Hitler’s Berlin – during the summer of 1936.¹ Nevertheless, the sights and sounds of the newly arrived international proletarian unit surprised and heartened residents of Madrid in the early morning hours of November 8:

In the Plaza de Antón Martín, ... Alvaro Delgado heard a song he didn’t recognize, [and] saw a group of well-uniformed soldiers wearing large blue berets and pulling machine-guns on rubber wheels behind them. They didn’t look at all

¹ David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 94–95; R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 29; Verle B. Johnston, *Legions of Babel: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 28–29.

like the militiamen in overalls the boy was used to seeing. ... They were singing the *International* – but in a foreign language. They gave him the impression of great strength.²

Early the following month the US State Department was officially apprised by its representative in Barcelona of the widening international dimensions of the war: “I am reliably informed that during the past few weeks there have been increasing quantities of munitions arriving from France. ... Some thousands of foreign volunteers have also arrived: these are mostly French but consist also of Russians, Germans, Italians, Poles, Belgians, and other aliens of radical sympathies.” The American consul went on to express “little doubt that these volunteers have been a factor in prolonging the resistance in Madrid, and from this vantage point the struggle appears to be presenting a more international aspect than at any time hitherto.”³ In the very near future the appearance of fighters with “radical sympathies” from the United States would be the subject of communications between officials in Washington and their envoys in Spain.

As introduced in Chapter 4, the decision of the Soviet Politburo to direct the Comintern to sponsor the formation of the International Brigades resulted in instructions to CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder to recruit volunteers, as well as procure supplies, from America. The bulk of the effort expended by the party to fulfill that mandate, at least through the end of 1936, was indirect and consisted of continuous

² Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 263; also quoted, in part, in Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 92.

³ Consul General at Barcelona (Perkins) to the Acting Secretary of State, December 2, 1936, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1936, Vol. II: Europe*, 584.

education and propaganda in the communist press, organization of mass rallies and demonstrations, and sponsorship of lectures by American and Spanish observers and participants. In those and other ways they succeeded in making the war in Spain the personal cause of members of the proletarian internationalist community, along with many of their allies on the non-communist left. As Malet, in his recent study of the phenomenon of foreign participation in civil wars, points out, the volunteers on the loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War were “True Believers who view[ed] the local civil conflict as one front [of] a larger transnational struggle in defense of their group ... having been told that they faced an existential threat at the hands of the other [side].”⁴ The CPUSA was not the only source of information on which American “true believers” based their commitments, but it was certainly the most persistent and effective one.

This chapter, which begins with the overt internationalization of the war, carries the story of the role of the American communist press in consolidating and mobilizing the proletarian internationalist community and its allies in defense of the Spanish Republic into the early months of 1937. As argued below, although the conflict would continue for another two years, and remnants of the International Brigades would remain for most of that time, most American volunteers had reached their decisions to fight in Spain by early 1937. During the interval examined in this chapter, the communist press continued to emphasize the dangers of international fascism and the virtues of anti-fascism and its communist and Soviet sponsors. Efforts at broadening the anti-fascist coalition under

⁴ Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 93.

communist leadership intensified, with the CPUSA portraying communism as the contemporary embodiment of the traditional American political values of independence and democracy. As will be discussed, although periodicals associated with the party continued, and even amplified, their coverage of the war in Spain, efforts at recruitment of supporters and volunteers was increasingly diversified, with the establishment of a variety of organizations affiliated with but nominally distinct from the CPUSA. Among their means of communication was the propaganda pamphlet, whose numbers proliferated during 1937. The results of these initiatives are examined below in the profiles of the American contingents of the International Brigades. Finally, the hypothesis that communist press coverage supplied a conceptual and linguistic framework within which members of the proletarian internationalist community and their allies formulated their own beliefs and decisions regarding Spain is tested through examination of both contemporaneous and retrospective testimonies of American volunteer fighters.

To the various themes of communist press coverage of Spain chronicled in previous chapters was, in late 1936, added another: the valor of the international defenders of the republic. In his update on the global stakes of the war, John Strachey tied the hope conferred by the arrival of the volunteers to the heroism of the country behind their efforts. Noting that the interventions of the fascist states “have now been answered by important contingents of men and material coming to the aid of the Spanish government ... from every country in Europe” with “the powerful backing of the Soviet Union,” the author averred that “surely everyone can see that the preservation of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the fascist tyrannies are not two causes, that there is

no question of putting the interests of one before the other. They are the same cause.”⁵ As with so many other aspects of Soviet policy toward Spain, the communist press needed to walk a delicate line in its coverage of the International Brigades and the inspiration behind them. Historian R. Dan Richardson observes, “The Communists tried to have it both ways: credit for the Brigades and their glorious exploits and, at the same time, the Brigades as a spontaneous effusion of antifascist solidarity.”⁶ The latter was the narrative consistent with that of the People’s Front and the ideologically broad coalition against fascism it sought. The former, however, was a component of an increasingly prominent fixture of party rhetoric: the battle against Trotskyism.

As described in Chapter 2, the failure of European revolution outside of Russia and the consequent dangers to the survival of the new Soviet polity that implied quickly led to a perceived congruence between the interests of the international communist movement and those of the USSR. Russian domination of the Comintern, along with its emphasis on protection of the Soviet state, was manifest even before Lenin’s death in 1924. Continued Bolshevization of international communism, combined with the “socialism in one country” doctrine enunciated early in the Stalinist period, solidified the role of the Comintern and its constituent parties around the world as instruments of Soviet foreign policy rather than as primarily agents of global proletarian revolution. Acceptance of that doctrinal development was far from universal among leaders of the international workers’ movement. At the Fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party of

⁵ John Strachey, “The Zero Hour,” *New Masses*, December 15, 1936, 11.

⁶ Richardson, *Comintern Army*, 34.

the Soviet Union in 1926, longtime Comintern leader Grigory Zinoviev proclaimed: “The final victory of socialism in one country is impossible. . . . *We are building and will build socialism in the USSR with the aid of the world proletariat.* . . . We will win final victory because revolution in other countries is inevitable.”⁷ And although Stalin would have Zinoviev shot a decade later, the name most associated with anti-Stalinist sentiment within the international proletarian community was that of Leon Trotsky.

Founder of the Red Army and member of the first Bolshevik Politburo, Trotsky became synonymous in Stalinist (which is to say, official Communist) circles with a level of danger, treachery, and thoroughgoing abomination scarcely approached even by fascists, whose malign intentions were at least not camouflaged (so the thinking went) by Marxist pretensions. The People’s Front policy of joint liberal-left anti-fascism, also a Stalin-era doctrinal innovation, coexisted in an apparent contradiction with the Great Terror of 1936-38. The Moscow Show Trials of “Trotskyite spies and murderers” focused the attention of the international proletariat, along with much of the rest of the world, on what Stalin and his supporters portrayed as a vital front in the war against fascism (see Figure 3).⁸ And the Soviet leader was clear that timidity in the pursuit of the internal enemy would not suffice: “We must chase out the Trotskyites, shoot them, destroy them.” He later broadened his vow to “destroy any such enemy, even if he is an

⁷ Quote in Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 54 (emphasis in original).

⁸ For one of many examples from the communist press of reports of the purported authenticity of the judicial proceedings and the guilt of the defendants see A. B. Magil, “Why Do They Confess?,” *New Masses*, February 16, 1937, 3-5.

old Bolshevik[;] we shall destroy his whole kith and kin. Anyone who encroaches on the unity of the socialist state in action or in thought, yes, even in thought, will be mercilessly destroyed.”⁹ As would be evident in Spain, juxtaposition of People’s Front anti-fascist unity with Great Terror anti-Trotskyite sectarianism only appears paradoxical if one fails to discern their common underpinnings.



Figure 3: The challenge to Stalin’s policies represented by Trotskyism was portrayed as serving the interests of fascism, and even of being a component of fascist international strategy. (Daily Worker, February 8, 1937. Reproduced with permission, Tamiment Library, New York University.)

The anti-Trotskyite campaign found expression in Spain largely with reference to the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification;

⁹ McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 142–45 (quote on 145).

POUM). Founded in 1935, its membership, which numbered six thousand at most, was composed largely of Catalan-speaking blue-collar and service workers. One of its founders, Joaquín Maurín, had observed that the Comintern, rather than the headquarters of world revolution it proclaimed itself to be, was instead “an instrument in the service of the Soviet state.” Although the party did not identify itself as Trotskyist, its position posed the same challenge to Stalinist doctrine and was thus considered by Moscow in the same category. The POUM attacked the People’s Front policy as reflective of Soviet self-interest but reluctantly entered the coalition, running in the elections of February 1936 on an explicitly revolutionary platform. The fact that the organization resisted the subsequent communist-led initiative to focus on the military struggle with the rebels rather than the social revolution against capitalism earned it not only the enmity of the communists but eventually its brutal suppression by Soviet agents in Spain.¹⁰

The dual face of communist policy – anti-fascist unity and anti-Trotskyist sectarianism – was evident in the party press throughout the period. Promoting a rally for Spain scheduled for the following day in New York’s Union Square, CPUSA National Chairman William Z. Foster invited Americans to “go forward with us in the formation of a national coalition of all progressives ... that will be a bulwark against war and the fascist threat to the liberties of all toilers. ... Shake the fist of international proletarian solidarity.”¹¹ Just over a week later the *Daily Worker* warned its fellow Marxists in the

¹⁰ Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 74–75, 81, 113; Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 261.

¹¹ “Rally for Spain in Union Square, Forster Appeals,” *Daily Worker*, November 27, 1936.

Socialist Party of a “Trotzkyite cancer” in its midst: “Much sooner than it seems to show signs now of realizing, the Socialist Party ... will have to take cognizance of the Trotzkyist poison that is eating at its vitals.” The editorial went on to counsel Socialists, “Rid your party of counter-revolutionary Trotzkyism. Join us at once in mobilizing support for Spain.”¹² Of course the author meant support for the Communist Party-led forces in Spain. Later that month the paper informed American workers of the duplicity of Trotskyists in that country, where purportedly “Trotzkyism gives especial hope to General Franco.” The piece went on to report that “the Trotzkyists concentrate their efforts of disruption in Catalonia, through an organization known perversely enough as the Workers Party for Marxist Unification (POUM). But an examination of their role very readily shows the counter-revolutionary part they play.”¹³ Only through an understanding of the imperatives of Soviet policy in Spain, and thus of the Comintern and its American affiliate, can one decipher the characterization of the POUM as “counter-revolutionary.”

Attacking Trotskyism, and the POUM in particular, as a force for disunity in the proletarian movement was only one of the familiar themes of an entire issue of *New Masses* devoted to Spain, as the war there reached the six-month mark. The international implications of the struggle were analyzed by Paul Nizan, foreign editor of the French Communist Party organ, *L'Humanité*. While crediting “the international columns and Soviet aid” with having staved off a quick rebel victory, the author adduced the evident

¹² “The Socialist Party and its Trotzkyite Cancer,” *Daily Worker*, December 5, 1936. The paper generally, though not invariably, transliterated the name of the revolutionary leader as “Trotzky” rather than what has become the more customary “Trotsky.”

¹³ “Trotzkyite Recruits in Franco's Fifth Column,” *Daily Worker*, December 18, 1936.

resolve of the fascist powers, combined with the apparent acquiescence of the ruling classes of Great Britain and France, to predict grave danger to the peace of Europe. Another article assailed the US resolution against arms sales to Spain, signed by the president on January 8, 1937 – converting the previous “moral embargo” into an official one – as “an embargo on democracy.” Anna Louise Strong, Moscow correspondent for *Soviet Russia Today* at the time and longtime radical journalist, published a set of appealing portraits of Spanish leftist and republican politicians, including Foreign Minister Julio Álvarez del Vayo, Catalanian President Lluís Companys, and Communist Cortes Deputy Dolores Ibárruri (“*La Pasionaria*”), as well as a French and a British writer fighting with the loyalists. In addition to the appeals to intellect characteristic of the magazine, the English translations of three ballads, taken from a collection of poems telling “the heroic story of modern Spain,” were also published in the “Spain: Six Months of War” issue.¹⁴

Reporting on the stated wishes of British Communist writer-turned-battalion-commissar Ralph Fox, killed a week after her interview with him, Anna Louise Strong indicated in her *New Masses* piece that Fox had urged her to “try to dispel the idea [among Americans] that our International Brigade is a foreign legion of mercenary adventurers. ... It is a real People’s Front army, for all the world. We want only genuine anti-fascists. ... If they can’t send men, let them send materials.”¹⁵ Although public

¹⁴ Ralph Bates, “Forging Catalanian Unity,” Paul Nizan, “Will Spain Repeat Ethiopia?,” Joseph R. Brodsky, “An Embargo on Democracy,” Anna Louise Strong, “People of Spain,” Rolfe Humphries, ed., “Three Ballads from Spain,” *New Masses*, January 26, 1937, 18-20, 9-10, 13-14, 4-6, 23.

¹⁵ Strong, “People of Spain,” *New Masses*, January 26, 1937, 6.

encouragement of American proletarian internationalists to volunteer for service in Spain was occasionally overt, for the most part the CPUSA and its publications were mindful of the risks involved in violation of US non-intervention policy. The *Daily Worker* did not even broach the topic of American volunteers until December 21, 1936, as an initial cohort of ninety-five of them prepared to depart from New York.¹⁶ On January 13, 1937, the US State Department declared that “the enlistment of American citizens in either of the opposing sides in Spain is unpatriotically inconsistent with the American Government’s policy of the most scrupulous non-intervention in Spanish internal affairs.” The most conspicuous sign of that policy was the “not valid for travel in Spain” stamp that had been appearing on US passports since the beginning of the war.¹⁷ Despite such efforts, however, by the end of 1936 the CPUSA had recruited nearly 200 volunteers, and the first contingents of what later became known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade arrived in Spain in January 1937.¹⁸

On January 12, the US ambassador to Spain sent to the secretary of state a lengthy outline of the situation in that country. Noting the presence of “great numbers of soldiers from the armies of Germany and Italy,” he described the British plan “to shut off volunteers” from going to Spain as a “policy [which] will operate solely in the interest of the rebels.” He concluded that “if volunteers are now excluded and professional soldiers

¹⁶ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 88–89.

¹⁷ Dominic Tierney, *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle That Divided America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 66.

¹⁸ Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), xv, 14.

of the armies of the Fascist States continue to come in, the result is inevitable.”¹⁹ On the following day, well before the ambassador’s dispatch had arrived in Washington, the consul general in Barcelona received a telegram from the State Department that referred to a report that seventy-six Americans had recently passed through that city, having entered Spain from France. The acting secretary instructed the envoy that if these Americans were “contemplating entering the military service either of the Spanish Government or of the Spanish insurgents,” he “may point out to these persons” that they would be in violation of US policy, which he quoted *verbatim*.²⁰ “These persons” and many others like them, of course, had long-since “contemplated” volunteering their services in the loyalist cause and were in Spain to implement their commitments to it.

By far the most overt call for American volunteers that appeared in the *New Masses* issue devoted to Spain was not part of any article but was instead an advertisement that occupied most of a page. Claiming in large, bold font and capital letters that “Spain needs American workers,” the notice asked members of that group “to take an industrial or productive job in Spain,” explaining that “each such worker would free a Spanish worker to join the military forces of his own country. ... The Spanish people need every fighting man on the front line to save Spain – and you – from the

¹⁹ Ambassador in Spain (Bowers), then in France, to Secretary of State, January 12, 1937, *FRUS, 1937, Vol. I: General*, 223-27.

²⁰ Acting Secretary of State to Consul General at Barcelona (Perkins), January 13, 1937, *FRUS, 1937, Vol. I: General*, 471-72.

fascist menace.” It also requested donations to “help send them across.”²¹ Similar notices by the American Society for Technical Aid to Spanish Democracy (ASTASD) appeared regularly in the *Daily Worker*, though other American newspapers refused to run them, likely owing to their obvious intent.²² A nearly identical mock-up of the advertisement that appeared in the *New Masses*, along with a news release dated January 7, 1937 from the ASTASD indicating that “before acceptance of anyone, his trade union and other organizational affiliations would be checked to ensure only anti-fascist workers from [sic] being sent to Spain by the Society,” is among the Earl Browder Papers.²³ The Society for Technical Aid was only one among several groups affiliated with the CPUSA to whom responsibility for stoking support for the Spanish Republic – including but not limited to recruitment of volunteers – increasingly fell.

With respect to the task of disseminating information congenial to the loyalist cause, arguably the most important of those affiliated organizations was the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (NACASD), founded in late 1936. Members of the CPUSA Politburo learned at their November 12 meeting that “the campaign to aid the Spanish people” had reached a new “stage with the setting up of the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy,” which had to that point “collected a little over \$30,000.” More than half of that sum was gathered at the October

²¹ Advertisement for American Society for Technical Aid to Spanish Democracy, *New Masses*, January 26, 1937.

²² Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 100.

²³ Advertisement Mock-up and News Release, American Society for Technical Aid to Spanish Democracy, Series 2, Folder 142 (Reel 6), Earl Browder Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.

26 rally at Madison Square Garden described in Chapter 4.²⁴ In early April 1937, Browder's extensive report to the Comintern boasted, "We have been able ... to secure a broad united front that is actively working in what is called the North American Committee for [sic] Spanish Democracy. This was formed on the initiative of the American League Against War and Fascism [a CPUSA auxiliary with a number of notable non-communist members²⁵]. ... This North American Committee is the centralizing organization for all of the mass collections, mass meetings and mass work in connection with Spain." The general secretary went on to name other such affiliates, including American Friends of Spanish Democracy, the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy, and the Society for Technical Aid to Spanish Democracy, the last of which he described as "a legal organization to cover our activities in organizing the volunteer movement."²⁶

By 1937, although the regular communist press continued and even intensified its extensive coverage of the war in Spain and its international and ideological contexts, pamphlets on the subject – mostly published by the communist-affiliated organizations described above – proliferated and became major sources of information and inspiration for the proletarian internationalist community and the allies it sought.

²⁴ Meeting Minutes, Politburo of the Communist Party of the USA, November 12, 1936, Reel 303, Delo 3976, Files of the CPUSA in the Comintern Archives, Tamiment Library, New York University.

²⁵ Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 107.

²⁶ Report, CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder to Comintern, April 4, 1937, Reel 305, Delo 4058, Files of the CPUSA in the Comintern Archives.

At thirty pages, the pamphlet *Spain: Battleground of Democracy*, produced for the NACASD, was unusually extensive. It framed the war as a fight over “a universal question: Shall constitutional democracy or dictatorial autocracy prevail?” The author summarized “Spain’s century of struggle,” culminating in the election of a People’s Front government and leading “the coterie of obstinate generals – backed by the princes of finance and by the Church – [to decide] upon bullets to regain the government.” He then proceeded to adumbrate the interconnected sociopolitical dimensions of the struggle, explaining first “the reasons that the most Catholic of countries has a strong anti-clerical movement” and the “top-heaviness” and “undemocratic nature” of the Spanish military. The “leading role” of labor in the republic was asserted, and the nature of the loyalist army “fighting to save the ... government they elected” and “for the division of the land, for separation of Church and State, for a democratic army, for the rights of labor” was contrasted with that of the “junta of generals, ... Moorish mercenaries, the fascist Spanish Phalanx, and the monarchist Carlists.” Characterizing the war as “a little world war on Spanish soil,” the pamphlet implored Americans not to “be indifferent to the outcome of a war for human freedom,” noting the contributions of Lafayette and Kosciusko who “made the American struggle for independence their own.” A text box on the final page of the document, requesting contributions to the NACASD, urged readers, “Take your stand beside the hard-pressed defenders of democracy in Spain.”²⁷

²⁷ Hubert C. Herring, *Spain: Battleground of Democracy* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1937), PAMALBA 138, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library, New York University.

Broadening the political reach of the left was, of course, part of the rationale behind the People's Front strategy. It is thus expectable that liberal-left organizations affiliated with but not directly under the aegis of the CPUSA, such as the NACASD and others introduced above, would promulgate messages in their publications tailored to a wider audience than that of the explicitly communist press. In addition, the assimilation of mainstream American liberal historical traditions and values to the aims of the Marxist movement and its project in Spain was increasingly evident in the communist press, and never more clearly than on the birthdays of the two presidents for whom the American battalions of the International Brigades were named.

On February 12, the *Daily Worker* published a photograph of the Lincoln Memorial, the caption of which quoted the sixteenth president as having "asserted that 'labor is prior to, and independent of capital ... and deserves much the higher consideration,'" adding that "during his life Lincoln was greeted by Karl Marx in the name of the European working class for his fight against slavery." Several articles in that issue were devoted to expositions of Lincoln's working-class affinities and revolutionary credentials. Browder was explicit that, "If the tradition of Lincoln is to survive ... this will be due not to the Republicans nor to the Democrats, but to the modern representatives of historical progress, the COMMUNISTS." Keeping its distance from accusations of recruitment for Spain, however, a photo under the heading "Lincoln Company Aids Spanish Democracy" was captioned, in the passive voice, "It is understood that a few hundred Americans are fighting on the side of the Loyalists in the International Brigade." And never missing an opportunity to score points against

Trotskyism, the CPUSA newspaper ran a brief piece by Ella Winter, author of the book *Red Virtue* and widow of celebrated progressive journalist Lincoln Steffens, that likened (ironically, it would turn out) Trotsky to Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth.²⁸

Nine days later, on the eve of Washington's birthday, the cover of the *Sunday Magazine* was a portrait of the nation's father on horseback, pointing his sword in the direction of battle, superimposed on a photograph of militiamen and women defending Madrid with rifles aimed toward the same out-of-frame enemy as the American revolutionary general's sword (Figure 4). Linking the people's army of the Spanish Republic to that led by Washington, the caption asserts, "Our famous Continentals would recognize in their defiant cry to foreign invader and fascist tyrant the living spirit of '76: 'They Shall Not Pass!'" adding, "Today our Valley Forge lies in Madrid. In the world-wide fight between reaction and progress, between fascism and the people's democracy, the crucial hour looms."²⁹ The following day, under the headline, "Communists the Heirs of the Revolution of '76," the *Daily Worker* published a section of Browder's pamphlet, "*Who Are the Americans?*" reminding readers that "the revolutionary tradition is the heart of Americanism." That piece, along with a familiar portrait of the first president, an article titled, "George Washington – American Revolutionist," a column that quoted Marx's praise for the Declaration of Independence on behalf of the First International,

²⁸ "Fought Against Slavery," "Europe's Toilers Hailed Fight on Slavery as Step in Labor's Liberty," Milton Howard, "Marx Saw Lincoln in Revolutionary Role," Harrison George, "Working Class Aid Helped Lincoln Win His Battle Against Slave Power," Elizabeth Lawson, "Lincoln the Choice of Workers, Farmers," Earl Browder, "Communists Give Life Today to Real Tradition of Lincoln" (emphasis in original), "Lincoln Company Aids Spanish Democracy," Ella Winter, "Ella Winter Likens Trotsky to the Assassin of Lincoln," *Daily Worker*, February 12, 1937

²⁹ "Valley Forge Lies in Madrid," *Sunday Worker*, February 21, 1937.

and several pieces on Spain, appeared under the banner headline, “Communism is the Americanism of the Twentieth Century.”³⁰ Americans born long after the opportunity to fight for their country’s independence from imperialism had passed, and too late to join in the struggle against the exploitation represented by slavery, could enact their quintessentially American – but nonetheless international and universalist – political ideals in the war against fascism in Spain.

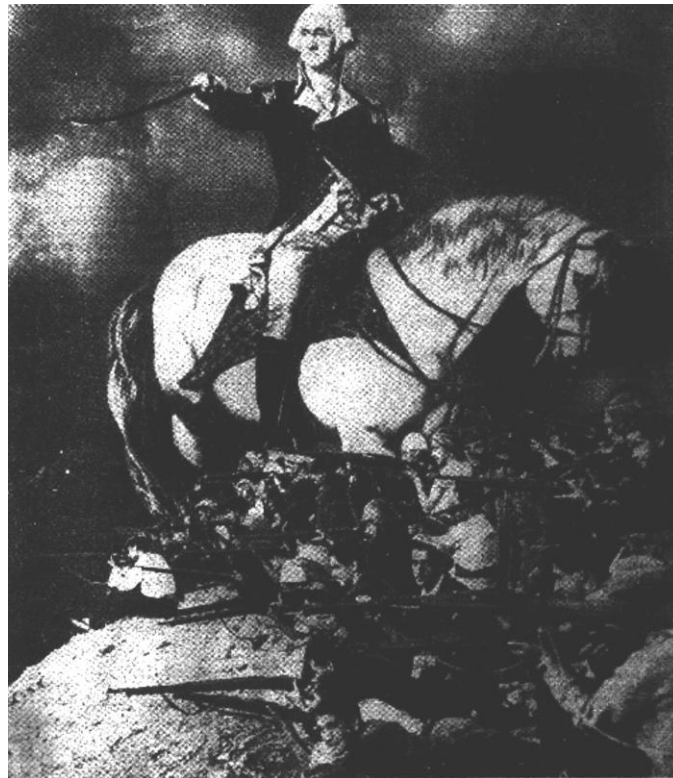


Figure 4: Assimilation of the Spanish loyalist cause to that of American Revolutionary patriots was portrayed concretely on the occasion of Washington’s birthday. (“Valley Forge Lies in Madrid,” Sunday Worker, February 21, 1937. Reproduced with permission, Tamiment Library, New York University.)

³⁰ Earl Browder, “Communists the Heirs of the Revolution of ’76,” Harrison George, “George Washington - American Revolutionist,” “Marx on the Revolution of 1776,” *Daily Worker*, February 22, 1937.

One such American, Ben Leider, was memorialized in a pamphlet published by an affiliate of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, itself an organization established by the CPUSA to help with recruitment for Spain.³¹ Its cover featured a portrait of the pilot who “died fighting for democracy” on February 19, and its first page dedicated it “to the memory of those Americans who heroically gave their lives that democracy might live and to those who are fighting today on the battlefields of Spain for the liberty of the Spanish people.” The pamphlet inaccurately labelled Leider as “the first American to be killed fighting to save Spain from fascism,” and proceeded to explain his commitment to the cause of Spanish democracy in the context of his life story. He shared with many other American volunteers a working-class Jewish background and personal experience with antisemitism. Having traveled throughout the USSR in 1927, purportedly as a reporter, he covered the Harlan County, Kentucky miners’ strikes in the early 1930s in which the CPUSA and affiliated organizations were heavily involved.³² After the start of the war in Spain, Leider reportedly explained to his friends his motivations for volunteering: “Listen, I’m not such a great talker as some of you, and I don’t say so much. But listen, I can’t sleep nights thinking about kids in this country not eating regularly, thinking about what Hitler and Franco are doing to the poor kids in Germany and Spain.” Following a description of his heroic feats in the skies over Madrid on February 17 and his final mission two days later, the publication quotes a letter to his brother that arrived in New York “a few hours after Ben Leider died” in which he

³¹ Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 99, 105.

³² Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 45–47.

characterizes the International Brigades and the hope they brought to the Spanish people as “something which has happened for the first time in history.” Asking on the back cover, “He gave his life for that cause, what will you give?” the sponsors of the pamphlet likely did not have only monetary contributions in mind.³³

Although President Roosevelt had intervened with the US Justice Department to prevent prosecution of recruiters for service in Spain,³⁴ the past involvement in such activities of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (FALB) attracted the attention of the FBI during World War II. Voluminous files later obtained through the Freedom of Information Act by the FALB’s successor organization, the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB), provide detailed documentation of the FBI’s many investigations, establishing connections between the CPUSA and the FALB/VALB and outlining their recruitment strategies. Among the numerous individual cases described, one report from April 1942 provides the flavor – if not all of the details – of the findings of these investigations:

[Redacted] is also the subject of the case entitled “[redacted] alias [redacted] Neutrality Act”; San Francisco origin. In the investigation concerning the latter case, one [redacted], Pacific Palisades, California, in a signed statement declared that [redacted] first interested him in ... going to Spain to fight for the Loyalists. [Redacted], who is a known Communist in San Francisco, on the staff of the Communist paper, Peoples World, introduced [redacted] to [redacted] at the

³³ *Ben Leider: American Hero* (New York: Ben Leider Memorial Fund, 1937?), PAMALBA 194, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Although the communist press adopted the legend of Ben Leider as the first American volunteer to be killed in Spain, the *Daily Worker* (“Mine Engineer, 47, First American to Die in Spain”) had reported on December 29, 1936 that “America's first casualty in the stirring battle of the Spanish people against fascism is Leo Fleischman, 47-year-old mining engineer and former United States Army captain of New York.”

³⁴ Tierney, *FDR and the Spanish Civil War*, 66.

Communist Party Bookstore, 15 Embarcadero, San Francisco. [Redacted] was accepted for service in Spain, and he was furnished with a bus ticket to New York by [redacted] ... [Redacted] related that [redacted] referred him to [redacted], which is the Communist Party headquarters in San Francisco. According to [redacted] this bus ticket was stamped with "World Tourists, Inc.," and [redacted] was directed by [redacted] to contact [redacted], Canal Street in New York City. According to [redacted], he followed instructions and was supplied with a steamship ticket by [redacted] and he sailed to France for service in Spain aboard the SS Manhattan.³⁵

The FBI files are filled with similar stories, which are consistent with the later direct reports of volunteers. The activities of the FALB were, however, hardly unknown to officials in the US government prior to the FBI investigations just described. A letter to David White, national chairman of the FALB, from Secretary of State Cordell Hull notes, "It is evident from the information in the Department's possession that most of the American citizens who have been serving with the armed forces in Spain were encouraged to go there by persons and organizations interested in helping the Spanish Government and have had their way paid to Spain by those persons and organizations." The secretary, asserting to the FALB chairman that "your organization is in a position to obtain funds from those persons or organizations in this country who have assisted these men to go to Spain, and who therefore have a clear responsibility to assist in their repatriation," hoped to shift the financial burden of caring for Americans wounded in Spain from the US government to those responsible for their presence there. And his

³⁵ FBI Report, "Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade," San Francisco, April 25, 1942, Box 1, Folder 14, VALB Freedom of Information Act Files, ALBA.251, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives.

letter making that request is among the papers of then-CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder.³⁶

By March 15, 1937, the US consul at Valencia estimated in a dispatch to the secretary of state that “the total number of American citizens enlisted with the Spanish Government forces ... is approximately 1,700. It is believed that the greater part of these obtained American passports issued in December, 1936, and January, 1937.”³⁷ In his April 4 report to the Comintern, Browder’s estimate of the number of American volunteers in Spain or preparing to travel there at that point was just over 1,700.³⁸ It thus appears that, although the State Department’s figure was likely inflated, of the approximately 2,800 Americans who fought on the loyalist side, a majority of them reached their decisions to volunteer by early 1937.³⁹ Considering the high casualty rates – causing, for example, the Lincoln and Washington Battalions to merge in July, after the Jarama and Brunete battles took their heavy tolls – recruitment of replacements for those lost continued for much of the remainder of the war. But for the most part the conditions, including communist press coverage of the war and its international political context, under which Americans formulated their commitments to the cause of Republican Spain were in place by early 1937.

³⁶ Letter, Cordell Hull to David White, May 27, 1938, Series 2, Folder 142 (Reel 6), Earl Browder Papers.

³⁷ Consul at Valencia (Davis) to Secretary of State, March 15, 1937, *FRUS, 1937, Vol. I: General*, 495-97.

³⁸ Report, CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder to Comintern, April 4, 1937, Reel 305, Delo 4058, Files of the CPUSA in the Comintern Archives.

³⁹ Estimates of the number of Americans who fought in Spain differ but tend to converge on the figure cited here.

Robert Rosenstone's 1969 study characterizes "the average volunteer" as "a man between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-seven who lived in an industrial, urban center where labor unions and radical political parties were most active." In addition to factory workers, seamen, longshoremen, and students were well represented. Most came from working-class families and "were more likely to be foreign-born or first-generation American than to come from old stock."⁴⁰ Although Rosentone estimates the proportion of Jews among the volunteers to be at least 30 percent, Gerassi concludes from his oral history project that the actual figure was more like 46 percent. The proportion cannot be fixed with certainty as the volunteers were not classified by ethnicity. He quotes Albert Prago, a Jewish veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, on the subject: "They went to Spain as internationalists, as humanists, as anti-fascists, as communists – while they may not have denied their Jewish heritage, they did not go to Spain identifying as Jews."⁴¹ Similarly, as the first US military force to be fully integrated racially among all ranks, members were not categorized according to that parameter either. The number of African American volunteers is thus uncertain but estimated to be just shy of a hundred.⁴² And with respect to political affiliations, Levenson, writing in 1986 in the CPUSA publication *Political Affairs*, adduces previous research to surmise that nearly two-thirds of

⁴⁰ Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, 98.

⁴¹ Ibid., 110; John Gerassi, "Jewish Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade," *Shmate* 1, no. 5 (January 1983): 6.

⁴² Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, 109; Leonard Levenson, "U.S. Communists in Spain: A Profile," *Political Affairs* LXV, no. 8 (August 1986): 27; Danny Duncan Collum, ed., *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do"* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), vii.

Americans fighting in Spain were members of the Communist Party or the Young Communist League.⁴³

American veterans of the Spanish Civil War have been remarkably prolific in their accounts of their experiences. And although those who survived differ in the conclusions they reached subsequently about the cause for which they risked their lives,⁴⁴ their motivations for having volunteered to fight – reported in both contemporaneous communications and retrospective memoirs – were similar. In a 1985 article, union organizer Bill Bailey described his early-1937 decision to join the loyalist cause in terms of internationalist anti-fascist commitment. With Mussolini waging war on Ethiopia, Hitler oppressing communists, socialists, trade unionists, and Jews, and the working class of the United States suffering disproportionately “the ills of a prolonged depression,” Bailey “joined with other progressive citizens . . . to put life into the idea of a united front against war and fascism.” Having visited Spain in 1935 while working as a merchant seaman, he “had great admiration for the Spanish worker and farmer” and with the onset of civil war the following year, “as a Communist,” Bailey “was convinced beyond doubt that what was happening in Spain would have a profound impact upon the struggle against fascism.” He “worked feverishly against the Neutrality Act from the beginning” and, “once the Republic had opened its arms and accepted the International Brigade to

⁴³ Levenson, “U.S. Communists in Spain: A Profile,” 26.

⁴⁴ For accounts of volunteers who subsequently turned away from the CPUSA, see Sandor Voros, *American Commissar* (Philadelphia: Chilton Co., 1961), and William Herrick, *Jumping the Line: The Adventures and Misadventures of an American Radical* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

defend its cause, all other things seemed to fade into the background. A serious wrong had to be corrected.”⁴⁵

Nearly a half-century earlier, labor organizer and CPUSA activist Joe Dallet explained his internationalist motivations to his mother in a letter from Paris before entering the war zone: “You know that I have been very much concerned with the situation in Spain. I profoundly believe that the military invasion of Hitler and Mussolini into democratic Spain must receive a military defeat of the first order if the peace of Europe and the world is to be preserved and if fascism is to be checked, instead of spread.” After assuring her that he would be “careful” in Spain, Dallet tried to console his mother that if he should be killed, she could “have the satisfaction of knowing that [he] fell in the most important battle in the world – the battle of democracy against fascism.” He reminded her that “without the help of the gallant Lafayette and his men, we would not be today the free USA.” And in a swipe at the American neutrality policy in contravention of which he had determined that he must act, Dallet wrote, “The free, democratic nations MUST unite against the fascist oppressors, and if to the ever-lasting shame of our fine national traditions the Roosevelt government helps the fascists rather than the friendly Spanish government, then right-thinking Americans must try to make up for this by their own actions.”⁴⁶ In early May, in a letter to party comrades back home written from the International Brigades headquarters in Albacete, Dallet picked up on

⁴⁵ Bill Bailey, “One Man’s Education: A Testimony to Internationalism,” *Harvard Educational Review* 55, no. 1 (February 1985): 101–8.

⁴⁶ Letter, Joe Dallet to his mother, March 19, 1937, Box 1, Folder 11, Papers of Joseph Dallet Jr., ALBA.032, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (emphasis in original).

another recurrent theme of the communist press, reassuring them that “in this part of the country one sees no traces at all of the defeatist and counter-revolutionary Trotskyite propaganda.”⁴⁷ Less than six months later Joe Dallet died fighting on the Aragon Front.

Like so many Americans, Carl Geiser of Orville, Ohio was deeply affected, personally and politically, by the Great Depression. By the early 1930s he had gravitated toward radical politics, joining the Young Communist League and the communist-led National Student League. As he later explained to journalist John Gerassi, “With fascism on the rise everywhere in Europe, it suddenly became very visible in the United States as well, with the Christian Front, Father Coughlin, the Nazi bund, and all. The consequence was that we got polarized quickly and I became more and more active.” After the military rebellion in Spain had clearly attracted potentially decisive military aid from Italy and Germany, Geiser decided by January 1937 that he “had to go.”⁴⁸ He described in a letter to his brother his rationale for volunteering as including a desire “to prevent a second world war” and, as a “democratic and liberty-loving” American, an obligation “to fight fascism.” Recognizing the international stakes involved, Geiser warned, “We ought not to think that if the fascists take Spain we are safe ... [any] more than we ought to think our house is safe if [the] neighbor’s is on fire.”⁴⁹ Freed in April 1939 after a year in rebel captivity in Spain during which he barely escaped execution, Carl Geiser returned home

⁴⁷ Letter, Joe Dallet to his “comrades,” May 5, 1937, Box 1, Folder 11, Papers of Joseph Dallet Jr., ALBA.032, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives.

⁴⁸ Peter N. Carroll and Fraser Ottanelli, eds., *Letters from the Spanish Civil War: A U.S. Volunteer Writes Home* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2013), 1–3; John Gerassi, *The Premature Antifascists: North American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: An Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 47.

⁴⁹ Carroll and Ottanelli, *Letters from the Spanish Civil War*, 11.

and in 1986 published a study of International Brigades members who were captured and imprisoned in Spain.⁵⁰

Many volunteers explicitly invoked the interests of their ethnic groups alongside their more general internationalism. Hoping to satisfy her quandaries, if not allay her anxieties, Hyman Katz wrote to his mother, “I came to Spain because I felt I had to. Look at the world situation,” and asked her, “Don’t you realize that we Jews will be the first to suffer if fascism comes?” After expanding upon that rhetorical question he added, “Yes, Ma, this is a case where sons must go against their mothers’ wishes for the sake of their mothers themselves. So I took up arms against the persecutors of my people – the Jews – and my class – the Oppressed. I am fighting against those who establish an inquisition like that of their ideological ancestors several centuries ago in Spain.”⁵¹

Much as Jewish Americans were drawn to the anti-fascist cause as a response to antisemitism in general and that of the Nazis in particular, African Americans gravitated toward it as an antidote to the discrimination and violence they faced at home and to the Italian Fascist war of imperial conquest in Ethiopia (see Figure 5). Jamaican-American immigrant Canute Frankson wrote from Spain to a friend in July 1937 to explain “why I, a Negro, who have fought through these years for the rights of my people, am here in Spain today.” Linking “the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter

⁵⁰ Carl Geiser, *Prisoners of the Good Fight: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1986).

⁵¹ Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, eds., *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 31–33.

which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's Fascist heels" with "the pages of American history stained with the blood of Negroes; stink with the burning bodies of our people hanging from trees," Frankson foresaw in the defeat of fascism "a new society – a society of peace and plenty [where] there will be no color line, no jim-crow trains, no lynching." Invoking the name of Communist *cause célèbre* Angelo Herndon, he concluded to his friend, "That is why, my dear, I'm here in Spain."⁵² A pamphlet published by the Negro Committee to Aid Spain sought to explain – as well as bolster – the motivations of black volunteers: "To them Spain was now the battlefield on which Italian fascism might be defeated. And perhaps Italy defeated in Spain would be forced to withdraw from Ethiopia. ... The place to defeat Italy just now is in Spain."⁵³

⁵² Ibid., 33–35.

⁵³ *A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain* (New York: Negro Committee to Aid Spain with the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, 1938?), PAMALBA 314, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. See also Collum, ed., *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, and James Yates, *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoirs of a Black American in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1938* (New York: Shamal Books, 1986).



Figure 5: The Ethiopian struggle against Italian Fascist aggression was among the factors attracting African Americans to the loyalist cause in Spain. (Daily Worker, May 7, 1937. Reproduced with permission, Tamiment Library, New York University.)

Whether white or black, Jewish or gentile, worker or student, revolutionary or liberal, each of the approximately 2,800 Americans who left home to fight with the Spanish loyalists doubtless had his or her own reasons for making that decision. What they had in common, however, was a conviction that events in Spain were of universal human significance and that the defeat of fascism was a necessary prerequisite to creation of a world in which they would wish to live. For at least two of every three of those American volunteers, that aspirational world was a collectivized one on the model of what some knew, but most only imagined, existed in the Soviet Union under the

Communist Party. As its representative in the United States, the CPUSA and its publications were enormously influential among this relatively small but energetic and committed group of proletarian internationalists who felt compelled to answer the call – both direct and indirect – of their movement. Their decisions came at tremendous cost: almost a third of them were dead when 1938 began and over 70 percent of the survivors who fought in Spain had been wounded at least once.⁵⁴ Nor did their sacrifices produce the desired results. With the republic effectively defeated militarily, the government decided in September 1938 on the withdrawal of all foreign volunteers in the vain hope that the other side would do likewise.⁵⁵ By the end of March 1939, all Spanish territory was in rebel hands.⁵⁶ Many of the warnings of the consequences of that outcome – for the Spanish people and for the rest of Europe – expressed by the proletarian anti-fascist fighters proved not to have been exaggerated.

⁵⁴ Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 204; Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 122.

⁵⁵ Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 292.

⁵⁶ E. H. Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1984), 80.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Exactly a century after the Working Men's Association's *Address to the Belgian Working Classes*,¹ generally considered one of the first expressions of modern proletarian internationalism,¹ members of the global laboring classes rallied impressively to the defense of the embattled Spanish Republic. They devoted their words, their thoughts, their time, their organizational capacities, their money, and in thousands of instances their lives in an effort to quell what they saw as an existential threat – embodied in the various right-wing movements they conceptualized under the rubric of fascism – to the success and survival not of their individual nation-states but of their explicitly transnational social class and political movement. The hundred years between those two events witnessed the transformation of the workers' movement from small organizations of limited reach to a world-wide network of communist parties whose adherents were disciplined and committed and whose mentor and master was itself a state – albeit of an ostensibly new type.

The Comintern was established as the headquarters of global Marxist revolution, though its mission quickly became representation of the interests of the Soviet polity whose survival was considered synonymous with that of the international workers' movement. When aggressively nationalist and violently anti-communist regimes in

¹ Marcel van der Linden, "The Rise and Fall of the First International: An Interpretation," in *Internationalism in the Labour Movement, 1830-1940*, ed. Frits van Holthoon and Marcel van der Linden, vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 327.

Germany and Italy were finally recognized as threats to the security of the USSR, Soviet policy – and, not coincidentally, international communist doctrine – came to view containment of their expansionist aspirations as an objective of paramount importance, warranting establishment of previously heretical alliances with non-communist leftist and liberal parties and organizations. And when the duly elected government of Spain, which instantiated the Moscow-inspired People’s Front policy of anti-fascist unity, was assaulted by a right-wing coalition that included fascists and was aided by the fascist states of Europe, the Soviet party and government and their international arm resolved to mobilize the politicized global proletariat, and as many of its allies as could be mustered, to save it.

In the United States, the success of the Russian Revolution had, as in many other countries, engendered a division in the Marxist movement, with the left wing bolting the Socialist Party – whose weakness as an instrument of proletarian internationalism was exposed in the failure of the Second International to prevent the First World War – and forming a revolutionary party aligned with that of the Soviet Union and with the Comintern. The early years of what became the CPUSA were marked by factional infighting and a marginal existence on the fringes of American radical politics. But with the economic and social traumas of the Great Depression, and the People’s Front policy instituted by the Comintern to defeat fascism, the Communist Party became the political home to growing numbers of American workers, both employed and unemployed, as well as students and intellectuals. To the already-strong representation of Jews and other relatively recent European immigrants was added, as a reflection of the party’s consistent

commitment to racial equality, the allegiance of a significant contingent of Americans of African ancestry. Successes in the arenas of labor organization and social legislation strengthened the prestige of the CPUSA among leftists and progressives such that the party was able to lead – albeit in many instances through affiliated “front” groups – the efforts of American proletarian internationalists to defeat the Spanish rebels and their foreign allies.

Prominent among the means by which the CPUSA nurtured the sense of community among American working-class radicals required to mobilize them at the behest of the Comintern in the Spanish cause was the printed word. In aggregate, the attention devoted to the civil war in Spain in the *Daily* and *Sunday Worker*, along with the *New Masses* as well as dozens of pamphlets and leaflets produced by CPUSA affiliates, was simply staggering and without present-day parallel. The sheer volume of printed material on the topic imparted to readers of the American communist press a priority and an urgency that were unmistakable. The messages contained in those nearly countless news articles, feature pieces, editorials, guest columns, political cartoons, personal profiles, historical primers, inspiring anecdotes, pleas for donations, and veiled exhortations to enlist to fight represented a finite number of themes which appeared in myriad configurations leading up to and during the war.

Unsurprisingly, considering the rationale behind the People’s Front strategy and its deployment in the defense of the Spanish loyalists, the dangers of fascism constituted a nearly ubiquitous theme in the American communist press throughout the period.

Fascism was variously characterized as a threat to democracy and personal liberties in general, and to the success and survival of the labor movement in particular. At the global level it was portrayed as posing a grave hazard to the peace of the world, and more specifically to the longevity of the Soviet state and thus of the international communist cause. People's Front anti-fascism, on the other hand, was depicted as the means by which the success of international fascism – a construct which was at times cast in sufficiently broad terms to include, for example, domestic conservatives in the Republican Party and Hearst newspaper editorial offices – would be checked and the forces of progress bolstered. The Manichean nature of the global struggle left no room for ambivalence, or even half-heartedness, in one's allegiance. That principle applied to states and their foreign policies as much as it applied to individuals. Thus, the moral shame of official US neutrality was condemned while the sham of the European non-intervention agreement was denounced as cover for pro-rebel sentiment among elites in the western democracies.

Portrayal of the forces behind the global efforts on behalf of the Spanish government was a matter that demanded more nuance. As noted in Chapter 2, although Stalin ultimately determined that a fascist state on the Iberian Peninsula was an outcome that must be resisted, he was nearly as concerned about the potential for spooking western public opinion through a conspicuous Soviet presence there, dooming his aspirations for a collective security arrangement against the fascist powers.² The

² Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 133.

American communist press thus walked a line between characterizing anti-fascist commitment as broad-based and democratic, on the one hand, and as communist-led and motivated by the priorities of the radical working classes, on the other. Although the anti-Trotskyist campaign may be seen as a dramatic exception to People's Front left-wing unity, it served as a vehicle through which valorization of the Communist Party and its Soviet patron could be presented in both uncompromisingly sectarian and comfortingly ecumenical ways. Trotsky's rejection of the Stalinist doctrine of "socialism in one country" – and the implications that rejection carried for the global revolutionary workers' movement – could be attacked as undermining the foundations of anti-fascist collaboration with non-communist forces and thus simultaneously endangering the western democracies and the USSR. In that context, praise of the Soviet leaders, policies, and people for their leadership of the proletarian struggle against fascism coexisted seamlessly with characterizations of communism as "twentieth-century Americanism" and a loudly proclaimed commitment to democracy, human rights, and representative government that justified naming the US battalions in Spain for Washington and Lincoln. Anti-fascism and pro-communism were thus two sides of the same coin for CPUSA partisans, if not for their non-communist allies.

As seen in Chapter 5, the political formulations of those Americans whose dedication to the Spanish loyalist cause was sufficient to compel them to volunteer to risk their lives in its prosecution bear striking resemblances to those promulgated by the communist press during the period in which those volunteers' commitments were being developed. Although such correlation cannot be taken as proof of unidirectional

causality, the evidence adduced above points persuasively to the importance of the voluminous and persistent coverage of Spain in CPUSA and affiliated publications in reinforcing convictions among American working-class radicals that Spain was the crucible in which the great global ideological struggle of their time was being waged and in providing a language for the expression of those convictions. It would be an error, however, to interpret that as a demonstration that American participants were mere recipients of ideas passed, bucket-brigade style, from Stalin and the Soviet party to the Comintern to the CPUSA leadership to rank-and-file readers of the communist press. That is not to say that anti-communists like Herbert Romerstein have no basis for asserting that “the cynical men in Moscow who made the political decisions, and those in New York who made sure they were carried out, cared little for the young victims. They were tools to be used on behalf of the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement.”³ But if American volunteers in Spain were “tools,” they were in large measure willing ones with deep and sincerely held affinities for the international proletarian community of which most saw themselves as integral members.

³ Herbert Romerstein, *Heroic Victims: Stalin's Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War* (Washington: Council for the Defense of Freedom, 1994), 90. For a well-documented elucidation of Soviet aims and tactics in Spain, edited by a former communist (Radosh), see Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov, eds., *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). An effort at portraying fairly the motivations of the Lincoln volunteers in the context of the left-wing politics of which they were instruments as well as participants is represented by Cecil D. Eby, *Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), and its predecessor by the same author, Cecil D. Eby, *Between the Bullet and the Lie: American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). A 1960s New Left perspective is provided by Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969).

The historiography of American communism, as outlined in Chapter 2, has tended either to emphasize the development of the party's organizational structure and its allegiance to and ultimate dependence on the leadership apparatus in Moscow, or to focus on the roles of American communists as genuine participants in radical politics within their local communities. Missing from those accounts is the formulation suggested by the foregoing evidence. That the CPUSA hierarchy followed policy dictates handed to it from above is beyond dispute. And while it surely exploited the substantial means of communication at its disposal to nurture the "imagined community" of proletarian internationalists for its own purposes, party members and their allies not only constituted that community; in many instances they defined themselves and their convictions and aspirations by it. The communist press undoubtedly shaped the perceptions, informed the opinions, and influenced the priorities of its readers, but for the most part their political ideologies were already formed.

Observers from the left have generally conceived of the Spanish Civil War as "the last great cause," and view with nostalgia and reverence the selfless dedication of the Lincolns to the freedom of a foreign people. Those on the right have tended to conclude that the volunteers were either hardened communist ideologues following the dictates of their Kremlin masters as filtered through intermediaries in the American party, or tragic dupes of self-serving communist propaganda. As the foregoing has shown, each of those formulations is correct but incomplete. Moreover, it is clear that those who left home to fight fascist aggression in Spain were motivated by an internationalist ideology of proletarian solidarity that was highly compelling to many working-class Americans of

whom insularity might instead have been expected. In our own era in which political boundaries have become less relevant in the face of violent non-state actors and global environmental threats, understanding how international ideological commitment is engendered and expressed becomes all the more vital.

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