

WHO IS THIS MAN? A WORLDWIDE SEARCH FOR AN UNIDENTIFIED SOLDIER FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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New York City—Who is the man on the 72-year old photograph that the Spanish government wants to present to President Obama this May? Is he an African-American antifascist? Or could he be Cuban?

On November 30, 2009, when the Spanish daily *El País* published [this image](#) of what, according to the newspaper, is an unidentified African-American member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, it set off something of an international frenzy. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade is the term used to refer to the almost 3,000 American men and women who, between 1936 and 1939, volunteered to take up arms against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. Contributing to the seductiveness of this historical mystery was the announcement made in the article by the heirs of the photographer, who said that they would like to locate the descendents of the soldier, and that they hope to present a print of the image to President Barack Obama when he next travels to Spain. The Zapatero government has already agreed to do this. The photograph in question was taken by one of Spain's great Civil War photographers, [Agustí Centelles](#) (1909-1985). Spain's Ministry of Culture recently [purchased](#) the Centelles archives from the photographer's heirs.

The part of the story in *El País* that really grabbed international attention was the challenge laid down by the two sons of the photographer: help us identify this man. The story was picked up by, among many other outlets, *The Guardian*, in a December 20 [article](#) written by Giles Tremlett, and by *CNN* and *CNN International*, which, on December 23, did live [interviews](#) with [James D. Fernández](#), a Board Member of the [Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives](#) (ALBA), which is located at New York University. The hunt was on.

The news story surprised many readers; why was an African-American volunteering to fight in a Civil War taking place an ocean away? ALBA estimates that there were about 90 African American volunteers among the roughly 2,800 Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War as part of what has come to be called the [Abraham Lincoln Brigade](#). Together with almost forty thousand other volunteers from some fifty nations, they had rallied to the support of Spain's legitimate government when it was attacked in the summer of 1936 by a faction of fascist military supported by Hitler and Mussolini. The ranks of the American fighting units in Spain were wholly integrated; in fact, an African-American from Chicago, [Oliver Law](#), commanded his Battalion at one point in the war; as far as we know, this is the first time in US history that a black officer led white soldiers in battle. Black Lincoln Brigade veterans who later served in World War II would have to suffer the indignities of a segregated Jim-Crow army.

[Sebastiaan Faber](#), an ALBA Board Member, recently threw a wrench into the works of the manhunt, by asking if the man in question might not in fact be Cuban. We know that there was a significant number of Cuban volunteers in the International Brigades, and that a proportion of them were Afro-Cuban. Faber located another photograph taken by Centelles of our man, holding a banner which reads: “1er Batallón Americano / A. Lincoln / Centuria Antonio Guiteras / Brigada Internacional.” The Centuria Guiteras was one of the three sections making up the first infantry company of the Lincoln Battalion, which itself was part of the Fifteenth International Brigade of the Spanish Republican army, formed in late January 1937. Named after the Cuban politician and revolutionary [Antonio Guiteras](#) (1906-1935), the Centuria included around a hundred Cuban soldiers, many living in the United States as political exiles from the Batista regime. Their baptism by fire was the Jarama Battle in February 1937, which decimated the ranks of the first division.

The Spanish Civil War marked a defining moment in world history. It is no coincidence that, in the last U.S. presidential campaign, both Senator McCain and Senator Obama identified *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ernest Hemingway’s novel about an American antifascist volunteer in Spain, as [their favorite book](#). And yet the story of the U.S. and Latin American involvement in Spain remains largely unknown among the American public. The quest for this soldier’s identity will help raise awareness of this important and fascinating episode in Spanish and American history.

Founded in 1979, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA) is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to promoting public awareness, research, and discussion about the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the American volunteers who risked their lives to fight fascism in Spain. Using its archival collections located at NYU, ALBA presents exhibitions, publications, performances, and educational programs related to the war and its historical, political, artistic, and biographical significance. With these activities, ALBA preserves the legacy of progressive activism and commitment of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as an inspiration for present and future generations.

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