

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. [www.alba-valb.org](http://www.alba-valb.org)

Contact: Jeanne Houck, Executive Director  
tel. 212-674-5398, fax. Fax: 212-674-2101, [jhouck@alba-valb.org](mailto:jhouck@alba-valb.org)

## ALBA TAKES PART IN A WORLDWIDE HISTORY MYSTERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: DECEMBER 25, 2009

### WHO IS THIS MAN?

New York City—When the Spanish daily *El País* [published](#) this photograph 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 archive itself has a tortuous history: the negatives had to be smuggled out of Spain towards the end of the war and had been hidden in southern France until after Franco's death in 1975. The story in *El País* was originally reported primarily in the context of the domestic rivalry in Spain over the memory and the archival legacy of the Spanish Civil War. Officials in the autonomous community of Cataluña—the photographer's place of birth—had hoped that the archive would remain in their region, and were disappointed when they learned that the archive had been sold to Spain's central government in Madrid.



But 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 [an article](#) written by Giles Tremlett, a veteran correspondent who has

lived for many years in Spain, and by [CNN](#) and CNN International, which, December 23, did live [interviews](#) with ALBA Board Member, [James D. Fernández](#). The hunt was on.

## WHY THE SURPRISE? SOME LIGHT FROM THE ALBA ARCHIVES

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. Most of these volunteer soldiers joined the International Brigades, organized by the Communist International.

Many politicized African Americans in the 1930s were drawn to the Communist Party, as it was practically the only organization in the US that was seriously addressing the scourge of racism. Many of the African American volunteers saw European fascism as being analogous to racial supremacy movements and attitudes in the US. Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 became a rallying point for radicalized African Americans. And when the chance arose to take up arms against Mussolini, Hitler and Franco in Spain, these radicalized African-Americans were ready to go.

The great African-American athlete, actor and baritone [Paul Robeson](#) and the great African-American poet and journalist [Langston Hughes](#) were champions of the American volunteers in Spain, and they actually visited the troops in the country during the war.

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.

## IMAGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VOLUNTEERS

The American brigade had a photo unit that took several thousand pictures of the American volunteers in Spain in order to document their involvement of the war and to promote their cause in the US and internationally. These photographs are part of the [Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives](#) at New York University, and many of them can be consulted on-line. Since racial justice and integration were important planks in the progressive platform represented by the American volunteers and the Communist Party, there is probably a disproportionate amount of photographs of African American soldiers in the [photographic archives](#) of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. There is also a considerable body of scholarship about the African-American volunteers and some of the publications include photographs. ALBA board members have been scouring the archives, our libraries and our hard-drives, trying to ID the man represented in the Centelles photograph. It can be tricky business trying to match images like this; two names have surfaced as possibilities, but neither is a perfect match. [Milton Herndon](#), the brother of Angelo Herndon, a leading figure of the radical African-American community in the 1930s, and [James Peck](#), one of a handful of American aviators—including a couple of African-Americans—who served the Spanish Republic.

## THE CUBAN HYPOTHESIS

[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. Sebastiaan 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 was led by Rodolfo de Armas and included around a hundred Cuban soldiers, many of whom had been 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, killing commander De Armas. In early March, the first division was reorganized as the Connolly-Guiteras Company. Soon after, most Spanish-speaking international volunteers were joined in the Spanish Battalion. With around 1,000 volunteers, the Cuban contingent was the largest group of Latin Americans fighting in Spain.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

ALBA is delighted that the publication of this photo has attracted a considerable amount of media attention throughout the world. We ought to remember, however, that this soldier is one of more than 100 African-American and Afro-Cuban volunteers, and one of about 40,000 members of the International Brigades; while putting a name to the face of this particular image is an exciting challenge, we see this as a wonderful opportunity to raise awareness of the broader issues at stake in the late 1930s and in the Spanish Civil War.

The enigma of the anonymous soldier in Centelles' photograph may never be fully resolved. It is somewhat ironic that the individual and national identity of this particular soldier has attracted so much attention. Volunteers uniformly resisted being singled out as heroes, and national identities were of little importance in the Spanish Civil War. The forty thousand volunteers who put their lives on the line in Spain did so because they believed fascism was a global threat that demanded international solidarity. They formed part of an international, multi-ethnic and multi-racial anti-fascist coalition of volunteers who went to Spain in spite of the fact that many foreign governments, including the United States, opted for non-intervention.

The Spanish Civil War marked a defining moment in world history. It is no coincidence that, in the last 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. If anything, the quest for this soldier's identity will help raise awareness of this important and fascinating episode in Spanish and American history.

#### **FURTHER READING**

Collum, Danny Duncan and Victor Berch, [African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: "This Ain't Ethiopia, but It'll Do"](#) (New York: Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, 1991)

African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: An ALBA learning module

<http://www.alba-valb.org/resources/lessons/african-americans-in-the-spanish-civil-war>

Vera Jiménez, Fernando "Cubanos en la Guerra Civil Española: La presencia de voluntarios en las Brigadas Internacionales y el Ejército Popular de la República." [Revista compultense de historia de America](#) (25, 1999) pp. 295-321. Available online at <http://revistas.ucm.es/ghi/11328312/articulos/RCHA9999110295A.PDF>

**Contact: Jeanne Houck, Executive Director**

tel. 212-674-5398, fax. Fax: 212-674-2101, [jhouck@alba-valb.org](mailto:jhouck@alba-valb.org)