

The *Brigadista* Was Cuban

The volunteer who appears in the photo that Zapatero wanted to give to Obama set sail from New York, but was not born in the United States – His name is still not known

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It was the perfect gift. A photo of an African American member of the International Brigades for an African American president who planned to travel to Madrid soon. It wasn't the impersonal tourist guide to Barcelona that Zapatero had given him the last time, nor the tried-and-true ham that he had presented to the president of Russia.

It was something more sentimental: an image taken by the photojournalist Agustí Centelles during the Spanish Civil War, of a black man who had traveled from the United States to Spain to defend the Republican side in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, to defend democracy. The only thing necessary was to find out his identity. After months of research, a team of experts from three countries (the US, Cuba and Guyana) has made some important findings.

"We read the article about it in EL PAÍS in December. We considered it a real challenge, and since then we have been engaged in an almost detective-like investigation," says Sebastiaan Faber, professor of Hispanic Studies and board member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA), located at New York University. Faber and his colleague James D. Fernández submerged themselves into the archive, which was created in 1979 by veterans of the Lincoln Brigade and has since been expanded with an enormous amount of documentation, from photographs to volunteers' journals. That's how they came across another photo, taken on the boat *Champlain* in New York, which shows the same man posing with other volunteers.

Centelles took the photo on January 17, 1937 in Barcelona. "On January 6th the first group of volunteers marched through the city. The first boat had left from New York at the end of December. And the *Champlain* left on January 6th," says Faber. They followed the trail. The man in the photo slept in the castle of Figueras, got to Barcelona in the morning, paraded in the afternoon and left that same night for the training camp in Albacete.

On another photo taken by Centelles on that same day, they saw that the black *brigadista* was holding a banner that, in addition to "Lincoln Brigade," included the phrase "Centuria Antonio Guiteras." Then they took a better look at the man around whose shoulder the *brigadista* had draped his arm on the *Champlain* photo: Rodolfo de Armas, the leader of that *Centuria* or army unit, a Cuban medical student who had distinguished himself in the protests against the Cuban president Gerardo Machado. "He died at Jarama and became a hero for the Cubans."

This is how they discovered that the black *brigadista* was not American but Cuban. "There is no doubt in our minds. He was a Cuban exile, very active in leftist circles in New York, who left the United States to join the Cuban contingent of the Lincoln Battalion." They found the definitive clue in the book of another volunteer, John Tisa, entitled *Recalling the Good Fight: An Autobiography of the Spanish Civil War* (1985), which included a photo in which the black *brigadista* appeared once again. The author referred to him as *Cuba Hermosa*.

Cuba hermosa, or "beautiful Cuba," is a phrase from a political song of the time period, entitled *Lamento Cubano* (Cuban Lament). It was only the man's nickname, since the team of researchers has not yet been able to determine the real name of Centelles' *brigadista*. "We have been eliminating all the names of known volunteers from the *Champlain* passenger list. We are left with only five: Bienvenido Domínguez, Faustino García, Juan Godoy, Ricardo Pérez y Ronaldo Rodríguez. He's one of them."