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MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

**HEALING THE WOUNDS OF FASCISM:
THE AMERICAN MEDICAL BRIGADE
AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR**

**AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS
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To my mother, Melanie Johnson,
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Areas of American Soldiers and Medical Personnel in Spain



Courtesy of Peter Carroll. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Stanford: 1994).

INTRODUCTION
THE AMERICAN MEDICAL BRIGADE AND THE SPANISH
CIVIL WAR

“Stem the blood of Spanish Democracy!”¹

In the middle of the 1930s, while the worst economic crisis in capitalist history plagued the United States, the government of a small country cried out for help against the fascist forces of General Francisco Franco. In response, the United States Left banded together, sending aid, American soldiers, and the American Medical Brigade, a group of doctors, nurses, and ambulance drivers who held one goal: the defeat of fascism in Spain. The well-known Abraham Lincoln Brigade joined the ranks of the International Brigades established out of Moscow, and quickly became the cause that unified the Popular Front of the 1930s. As of yet, no one has taken the time to tell the lesser known story of the American Medical Brigade. Nonetheless, it was equally important to the American Left at a time when Communists, Socialists, idealists, and simple anti-fascists united no matter what their nationality, color or gender to help the legitimate government of Spain. The Spanish Civil War exemplified the fight between democracy and fascism, opened the scene for World War II, and created a specific goal which joined the Popular Front during the 1930s.

American Medical Brigade members came from all walks of life. Dr. Edward Barsky was a graduate of Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons. He was tall, charismatic, and regarded by his fellow nurses as extremely handsome. He held a respectable position as assisting surgeon on the staff of Beth Israel Hospital in New York City and had studied in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris before joining the Communist Party in 1935.

Evelyn Hutchins was a spunky blonde woman of twenty-seven, who was a fervent feminist and eager to counter any man who denied her equality. She grew up in Washington with a step-father who was a militant stevedore and a suffragist mother. At age eighteen she left home to become a professional dancer but the crash of the stock market in 1929 cancelled any hopes of a career. Consequently, she turned to politics, and more specifically, the Communist Party.²

Dr. Leo Eloesser was a world famous thoracic surgeon based out of Stanford University. He spoke at least six languages, including Chinese, and had recently returned from medical service in World War I. His only political affiliation noted was that of an anti-fascist. At age fifty-nine, when Franco began his Spanish coup, he simply stated, "I hate dictators and if I hate them enough I should be doing something about it."³

In early 1936, Salaria Kee, described by the poet Langston Hughes as "...a slender chocolate colored girl," offered her services as a nurse to the American Red Cross to help flood victims in her home state, Ohio. On

account of her race, the organization turned her away. Upset, a friend mentioned volunteering in Spain. “Fascism is very well understood in America where millions of people oppose it. What else is Jim Crow but part of Fascism?”⁴ Henceforth, Kee resolved to be firmly anti-fascist, even if it meant risking her life for it.

At first glance, these men and women may not seem to have much in common, but they shared a strong social spirit and in January of 1937, they were comrades in American Medical Brigade. Barsky was the Brigade’s head doctor, Eloesser a surgeon, Kee a nurse, and Hutchins the only female ambulance driver on the Spanish front. They journeyed to Spain in an effort to change foreign and domestic policy against Spain, and to change the course of history.

The Spanish Civil War pitted a democratically elected republic, against a fascist uprising actively supported by Hitler and Mussolini. It was a complex history of insurrection and rebellion, democracy and tyranny. In 1931 the “Segunda Republica” of Spain was the first ever democratically elected government in Spanish history.⁵ In the spring of 1936 the government suffered from severe instability under President Azaña. Consequently, on July 17 General Francisco Franco led a right wing military insurrection against the legitimate government of Spain, declaring a military coup against the Republic. On July 18, the Insurgents moved to Seville and successfully took the city but were defeated by the Republic at Barcelona. After this defeat, the

Insurgents appealed to Germany and Italy for support as Franco took control of the forces and on July 26, German and Italian planes, the first of many supplies and troops, landed in Morocco to help the insurgent forces. What might have remained an internal struggle turned into a worldwide symbol of democracy against fascism.⁶

The Spanish Republic was one of the first nations to directly oppose fascism, a form of politics that rose to the world's attention at the hand of Benito Mussolini, who displayed his contempt for the masses, emphasizing the need for elite leadership. It holds an emphasis on voluntarism rather than communalism. In the fascist state, the fundamental unit is the nation, one is either part of it or not. One either has national values or has none at all. The nation-state, and therefore the elite dictator, (Mussolini, Hitler, and later Franco) is the ultimate authority in all matters.⁷

The Spanish Republic knew it was unable to measure up to the firepower of Franco, who was backed by Mussolini and Hitler. The Republic appealed to the democracies of the world but did not receive the help it had wished for. The French provided the Loyalist government with a small number of planes before proposing a world-wide non-intervention policy, which was ignored by both Italy and Germany. The British government refused to act, and in the United States, under Roosevelt's urgings, Congress embargoed both sides of the war. In refusing to sell arms to the Republic, the US, France, and Britain in effect sided with the Nationalist Insurgents.⁸ The embargo did not merely

prevent supplies from being given to the Spanish Republic; it denied them the right to buy firearms with which to defend themselves, and medical supplies to tend their wounded.

Gradually, while watching the Spanish Republic struggle against the fascists, an international base of volunteers began to form. They started with the refugees of fascist Italy and Germany, many escapees from concentration camps. The International Brigades became a reality when the Communist party of Moscow formed official brigades to aide the Spanish Republic. In early 1937 large numbers of soldiers began to join the brigades from England, Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Canada, along with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade of the United States. For many idealistic defenders of democracy, Madrid represented “the heart of a civilization, of a world, and of an ideal, that 35,000 men from 53 foreign lands would put their lives on the line to protect.”⁹

In the International Brigades, there remained the sense that one was part of a cause rather than a country. In a letter home, female Brigade nurse Dorothy Fontaine commented, “...it is wonderful to be part of an international movement. I’ve met wonderful people from all nations...”¹⁰ This international brotherhood stretched to the United States, and became the trademark of the American Popular Front. During the 1930s, the Popular Front represented the union of all Leftist groups with one common goal. Communists, Socialists,

liberals, and the like put aside their differences in the name of one thing: anti-fascism.

Though American volunteers went overseas to serve in Spain for a plethora of reasons, over eighty percent represented the Popular Front as members of the Communist Party and still more had significant affiliations with Communist organizations. The Spanish Civil War served as a unifying cause of the Communist Party, creating one rallying point: anti-fascism.¹¹

While non-intervention reigned in the United States, the Spanish Civil War tapped into a radical movement from the leftist population in the United States. The popular uprising in support of the Spanish Republic rose immensely over the span of 1938. Speeches, flyers and buttons urged that medical supplies be sent overseas. Returned veterans spoke to masses about their experiences and urged both participation and donation. Pickets sported the slogan “Lift Embargo to Spain” and volunteers made clothing for soldiers. Organizations such as the International Workers Order and the Students and Faculty of Harvard University even donated ambulances to the cause.

In conjunction with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the American Communist Party created the American Medical Bureau under the direction of Dr. Edward K. Barsky and planned a medical expedition to Spain. The Party offered a means to reach Spain, though as with the Lincoln Brigade, not all its members were Communists. There was only one political stipulation in joining the Medical Brigade: anti-fascism.

The newly formed Medical Brigade, a group of seventeen doctors, nurses, lab technicians, and ambulance drivers sailed to Spain to man the first American hospital on Spanish soil. As Fredericka Martin, the group's head nurse put it, "The elemental need in war is medical care for wounded soldiers. In total war it is medical care for military and civilian wounded."¹² With them, they carried their ideals, political views, and varied expectations.

Their arrival in Madrid provided them with the shock of a lifetime. The Spanish Civil War was not a neat war between civilized men, but a butchery of both soldiers and civilians. Hitler and Mussolini used Spain to practice many of their new tactics of bombing civilians. The Red Cross sign on the top of hospitals was suddenly a "bomb here" symbol for the fascist troops. On this subject, in an interview, Dr. Barsky stated:

Yes, not so long ago our hospital was bombed. Nine bombs were dropped about 250 meters away from the hospital. None of our groups was injured. Once at night when our ambulances were transporting wounded the fascist planes attempted to bomb them. They came close but missed...It is pure destructive terrorism.¹³

The Spanish Civil War was no ordinary military conflict. In the brutal spirit of World War II, which followed several years after the Spanish War's resolution, borders between the front and civilian territory were virtually nonexistent.

Looking back on the Medical Brigade's contribution to the Spanish Civil War, in 1977 the *San Francisco Chronicle* stated that "The Spanish Civil War

has been called the ‘pure war,’ the last time, perhaps forever, that the forces of good and evil were so clearly defined.”¹⁴

The American Medical Brigade set out with this ideal—a strong sense that they were doing what was right for not only their nation, but for the world. Backed fervently by the Communist Party, doctors and nurses planned on turning their Spanish hospitals into small utopias. They expected to share supplies, be free of ranks, and live in relative harmony to the warring world around them.

For example, when their first stable hospital was set up at Villa Paz in March of 1937, hospital interpreter Mildred Rackley recalled, “Villa Paz was the best place. It was a lovely villa which had been abandoned by the Infanta of Spain years before. It was still furnished with lovely paintings, rugs, books, antique furniture—just as the Infanta must have left it.”¹⁵

Head surgeon, Dr. Barsky took a similar tone when speaking of the hospital. “The Infanta’s villa was an enchanting place. There were most romantic gardens with rare trees and sweet flowers, and there were nightingales in the trees.” In his memoir, he spoke of the hospital’s beginning efficiency with proud recollection. “Villa Paz was soon transformed. It held two hundred and fifty beds, and a good operating room, x-ray equipment, all that was essential in fact, to make it a first class American hospital.”¹⁶

Though Brigade members began their stay in Spain with utopian ideals, their spirits were soon rocked by fascist bombs, brutally wounded soldiers,

and a desperate lack of supplies. Doctors fought over rank, nurses complained endlessly over hospital conditions, and the fear of death at the hand of a shell or corresponding piece of shrapnel was always just around the corner.

The men and women of the American Medical Brigade experienced the tensions felt on a personal level between Communism and its applied ideals. Though they tried to remain optimistic in the face of horror (and most did in their letters home), the trauma of the Spanish Civil War took a tremendous toll on their psychological states. Through the frame of the highly politicized Spanish Civil War, doctors and nurses in Spain were testament to the wounds that Franco's fascism inflicted on the people of Spain. Through the first study centered specifically on the Medical Brigade of the Spanish Civil War, a story emerges that does not speak of heroism, but of what happened when one of the most brutal wars in world history tested the utopian ideals of doctors and nurses.

NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION

- ¹ Publication by the Medical Bureau to encourage donations to American hospitals in Spain. *The New Masses*. January 5, 1937.
- ² Peter Carroll. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. (Stanford: 1994) 68-70.
- ³ Harris B. Shumacker. *Eulogy for a Free Spirit*. p. 159, Tamiment Library, New York University, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (henceforth referred to as ALBA), Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 7, Folder 9.
- ⁴ Unpublished Memoir of Salaria Kee from: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 9, folder 33.
- ⁵ Commentary on Spanish Civil War history found in: Gabriel Jackson. *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: 1974).
- ⁶ <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/scw/scw.htm>. About the Spanish Civil War, by Cary Nelson.
For more on the Spanish Civil War refer to: Raymond Carr, *The Spanish Tragedy* (London: 1977), or George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert. *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context*. (Essex: 1995).
- ⁷ David Ingersoll. *Communism, fascism, and democracy; the origins of three ideologies*.(New York: 1971) 35.
- ⁸ Robert Rosenstone. *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*.(New York: 1969) 262.
- ⁹ Ibid. 29.
- ¹⁰ Dorthy Fontaine's Quote taken from: *Into the Fire: American Women in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: 2002).
- ¹¹ Carroll, Peter. *Odyssey*, 108.
- ¹² Unpublished memoir of F. Martin: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 9.
- ¹³ Ibid. Box 5, Folder 17
- ¹⁴ *San Francisco Chronicle*. Feb. 10, 1977. ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers.
- ¹⁵ Mildred Rackley, SCW memoirs: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 14.
- ¹⁶ "Surgeon Goes to War: Unpublished Memoir of Dr. Edward Barsky" found in: ALBA, Edward K. Barsky Papers, Box 5, Folder 9.

CHAPTER ONE WHY SPAIN?

Though Communism was my waking time,
Always before the lights of home
Shone clear and steady and full in view-
Here, if you fall, there's help for you-
Now, with my Party, I stand quite alone.¹
-Abraham Lincoln Brigade chant, Madrid, 1937.

Why risk one's life to join the American Medical Brigade? There was little fame involved, no fortune attached, and it shortly became illegal in the United States, where all passports were stamped with "*not valid for travel in Spain.*" There was no simple answer. From their very start in early 1937, the American Medical Brigade threw about slogans such as "We will quell fascism" or "Help a suffering democratic nation" but in truth, doctors and nurses took the trip for reasons as varied as their own personal backgrounds. Granted, they *did* all have strong feelings toward opposing Franco's rebellion, but factors such as radical politics, religion, race, and the search for heroism played into more personal reasons for joining the Brigade.

The Communist Party was one of the most overwhelming pulls into both the International Brigades and the Medical Brigade. If one wanted to go fight in Spain or serve in a hospital, the Communist Party organized entrance into the Brigade. To keep with Popular Front policy, the Party obscured the extent of its participation in the Spanish conflict to the American public. It

wanted to present the Spanish war effort not as another Communist Party cause, but as a unified front against fascism. For this reason, the Communist Party masked the exact number of its members in the International Brigades. *New York Times* reporter Herbert Matthews thought it was 80 percent, yet Lincoln Brigade commander Hans Amlie claimed that only 25 percent of its members were Communist.²

Even in the late 1960s, when Robert Rosenstone wrote his influential book, *Crusade of the Left: the Lincoln Battalion and the Spanish Civil War*, he guessed that the proportion of Communists in the International Brigades was “perhaps half.”³ He claimed that the Brigades did not keep records of political affiliation. When asked to indicate their politics, they would simply write “anti-fascist.”

In truth, formation of the International Brigades was a Comintern Operation and thus official records of their politics can be found in the Comintern archives in Moscow. The most comprehensive list, taken in October of 1937 showed that 65.6 percent belonged to the Communist Party and another 13.7 percent were members of the Young Communist League, making the total Communist participation at 79.3 percent.⁴

The American Medical Bureau stemmed from this atmosphere of rebellion in October of 1936. Dr. Edward Barsky, who would soon find himself heading an entire Spanish hospital, was one of the Medical Bureau’s founders. Barsky had been a member of the Communist Party since November of 1935, but to

keep with Popular Front policy he made it seem as if his interest in Spain had sprung out of the blue. In truth, Barsky was already a committed Communist, and had attended many meetings supported by Popular Front causes.

It was at one of these very meetings that his long dedication to the Spanish cause began. In his memoir, "A Surgeon Goes to War," he said, "I went to a meeting. Yes, that was the beginning." The aforementioned meeting was a delegation sent by the Spanish government to beg for American help and international sympathy. Barsky was aware of problems in Spain, aware that the small country, after years of repression was trying to become a democracy, but until this meeting their cause had yet to affect his own life.

The speakers present were two untypical Spaniards: a woman lawyer, and a Catholic priest from the Basque country. For women, the legitimate Spanish government was the first to let them take professional jobs and receive an education. This was all being threatened by Franco and the Nationalist Insurgents. In the case of the priest, it seemed unusual because the Catholic Church had aligned itself vehemently with Franco, helping to add to the future dictator's legitimacy. Many were unaware that the Basque province hosted a group of Catholic clergy who were on the side of the legitimate government.

Barsky remembered that the two speakers presented a clear issue. "A peaceful government made up of many factions trying to balance itself, trying to restore a measure of social justice, had been attacked by a perjured army, by generals who had first sworn alliance to the government and then enlisted

foreign help against it.” Barsky was incensed, but took heart in the accounts of the brave Spanish people who fought desperately against the Insurgents.

“Sometimes unarmed, men and women together, in overalls, untrained militia fighting machine guns with picks and stones. They fought for freedom.”

Shortly, Barsky found himself at a meeting in the home of his friend Dr. Louis Miller, who he claimed knew a great deal about American medical missions to foreign countries. One night at the meeting, the subject turned to Spain and their government, which had almost no medical service. He remembered someone saying “That sort of thing ought to be our meat.” So Barsky and his fellow medics formed the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy.

Barsky makes the meeting sound as if it was an original idea, but in truth, the Popular Front formed the American Medical Bureau fairly late in the game. The Communist Party had already created other Popular Front organizations to aid Spain such as the American Friends to Aid Spanish Democracy, the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, and even the American Negro Committee to Aid Spanish democracy, all of which were based out of New York and had similar functions. Hiding their Communist Party affiliation behind the blanket term Popular Front, they raised money and troops to send to Spain.

On December 25, 1936 the first 95 American troops boarded the *SS Normandie*, headed for Spain, forming what would soon be nationally known

as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. By February of 1937 their ranks, which had swelled nearly four times their original size, served to hold the American public's interest in the Spanish conflict. Now there were American soldiers in Spain, and consequently there was a tangible link between the Spanish people and America. The Medical Bureau capitalized on this and began raising money for both the soldiers and the impoverished people of Spain. The Bureau fundraised furiously, almost exclusively with Popular Front organizations, to send ambulances and medical supplies to the Spanish front. In three months, thanks to overwhelming enthusiasm from the people of the American Left, they had enough to supply an entire hospital. Here sprung the next idea: why not man the hospital too?

Finding personnel to man the proposed American hospital was much more difficult. At this point Dr. Barsky had no intention of leaving his New York practice. He worked all day, and spent his nights planning the medical mission to Spain as head of the personnel committee, making sure the right sort of people were chosen for the job. "They must not be sentimentalists...we could take only persons ready to die if necessary for their convictions." They had to be proficient in their medical practices, and it helped to have extra skills such as knowledge of mechanics or pharmacy. It was difficult to find qualified volunteers, though he mentioned "One type we had no particular use for and these came to us in droves: writers. We had a very impressive permit from the State Department licensing our work and permitting us to send personnel

over-seas, and these literary gentlemen were anxious to ride on this magic carpet.” Though they were not particularly useful, Barsky accepted a few as chauffeurs, mechanics, or hospital assistants.

Facing some difficulty in finding qualified doctors, at an American Medical Bureau (AMB) meeting, someone shouted, “Look here...we’ve got to go! The way to go *is* to go. We set a date right here. To-night...We’ll make it January sixteenth.” So after months of planning and anticipation, Dr. Barsky committed himself to the service of the American medical unit and to no one’s surprise, the Medical Bureau appointed the charismatic doctor its head.⁵

Energetic Fredericka Martin, who was an experienced nurse at Christ Hospital in Jersey City, was Barsky’s choice for head nurse of the Brigade. She was an active member in her nurse’s union, attended political sciences classes at the Labor Temple in NYC, and had begun studying both Russian and Yiddish in 1936. She agreed to go, but not without some trepidation. Years later in an interview she laughed and called herself “the only nonvolunteer” of the group. “Someone from my nurses union asked me if I would be willing...to leave my pleasant rut,” she recalled. “...and of course I was.”⁶

Others such as Mildred Rackley, a fervent Communist from New Mexico, showed more enthusiasm. Rackley was an adventurous young spirit who had traveled to Europe in 1930 to study painting. There she witnessed first hand, the parades of Hitler’s fascist troops in Hamburg, and escaped to Mallorca,

and island off the coast of Eastern Spain. When she returned to her home state, she became highly involved in radical politics and tried to arrange a union uprising in New Mexico without much luck. She was searching for other ways to become involved when Dr. Barsky called her to ask if she wanted to sail to Spain to be his secretary and interpreter. Recalling her previous visit to Spain she said, “I had lived in Spain in Mallorca in 1932 and 1933 (a year and a half) and loved the country and the people; and was deeply moved by their enthusiasm for their new Republic with all its new possibilities for them—in government, freedom in religion, and in the possibility of getting education, getting land. What exuberance!” So when Barsky handed her the opportunity to help the people of Spain, she immediately agreed.⁷

After months of planning, the Medical Bureau put together its first Medical Brigade and on January 16 of 1937 it sailed for Paris “cheered by a hundred friends and sympathizers of Loyalist Spain.”⁸ The first party included 5 doctors, 8 nurses, 1 druggist, 1 bacteriologist, 2 ambulance drivers, and Mildred Rackley as its interpreter. As soon as they reached their destination, just south of Madrid, they received their first surprise: there was no building in sight designated for their American hospital. The Spanish hospital commander told them to set something up closer to the Jarama front, where the American soldiers were fighting, so Barsky, Martin, and Rackley set off on their own, in search of a suitable place for a hospital.

They established their first hospital at a new schoolhouse at el Romeral. The mayor gladly gave them the building but Barsky recalled a tinge of regret while watching the education of the Spanish children being thrown out the window. “When we arrived the children whose brand new school we were seizing were packing up their books, and teachers were ripping blackboards from the newly plastered walls. In less than two days it was already full of wounded. Necessity could not wait for us to finish.”⁹

Meanwhile, at the battle of Jarama in February of 1937, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade received its bloody baptism of fire. Soldiers who had never held a gun before, most who still wore their traveling clothes, were pushed into a battle along the Jarama River Valley to keep Franco’s Rebels from breaking up the Madrid-Valencia highway. American men, who had learned their war tactics from reading books by Clausewitz, were pushed to the front to act as shock forces against the Rebel troops. By the end of the battle on February 16th, only 100 of the men were still standing, 200 were dead, and the rest were transported to the new 75 bed American hospital at Romeral. Thus, the harrowing hospital experience of the Medical Brigade began¹⁰.

In the wake of such horrors on the battlefields and consequently in the hospitals, American volunteers tried their best to hold strong to their political beliefs. For many doctors and nurses, this meant enacting Communist ideals in the hospitals as the only way they knew how to keep order.

First of all, prospective medics felt that America's policy of isolationism toward the Spanish conflict was deplorable, especially in light of Hitler and Mussolini's not-so-secret participation on Franco's side of the war. Doctor Zachary M. Stadt was "Incensed at the injustice manifest in the failure of world organizations to act to prevent war: Japan's invasion of China, Italian attack on Ethiopia, and the failure of the U.S. especially and other great powers to come to the aide of Republican Spain...Finally there was a full page add in the *N.Y. Times* by the MBASD [Medical Brigade to Aid Spanish Democracy]. Clipped the coupon—and that was it."¹¹ Stadt, who already carried strong ideals within, was caught by Barsky and other Medical Bureau officials' effective advertising.

In an official Medical Bureau publication, Dr. Barsky described the Brigade: "It is truly a people's army that will never be demoralized. They have a political awareness that is not usually found in armies."¹² The Spanish war attracted a very different type of soldier from the previous World War. It held an extremely high political charge, therefore, it makes sense that its participants would hold equally strong political convictions.

Reminiscing on the outcome of the Spanish Civil War, Nurse Dorothy Fontaine stated, "I always believed we could have stopped the Second World War in Spain...I still believe that Capitalism stinks..."¹³ She represented the majority of the American medical staff, who were eighty-percent Communist. Thinking in a similar manner, Dr. John Simon claimed that his "...stodgy,

bookish language [was] inadequate to express the thrill that comes to one who, attempting to follow the teachings of Marx and Lenin, finds himself about to fight for the most oppressed and wretched group of people he has ever seen.”¹⁴

Before joining the Medical Brigade, Jack Klein mentioned that his social background, including an introduction to Communism, had significantly influenced his reasons for joining. “By chance I now lived in a neighborhood where many young men had no employment and would meet nightly in the back of a large cafeteria nearby, and here, night after night, many topics were discussed, but mainly politics of a Marxist coloration.”¹⁵ He participated in Communist rallies and trade union meetings before he decided to follow the Party’s call to Spain.

Dorothy Fontaine was already a Communist and believed firmly in the Party’s internationalist stance. She decided to go to Spain after it was mentioned at a local Communist Party meeting and claimed, “We no longer trust or believe the democracies of the world, who are leaving us here to fight for our democracy and theirs. They have given us no help—instead a lot of trouble. We are only interested in the union of the Workers of Spain and of the world.”¹⁶

On the other hand, Nurse Lini deVries, said she had not been particularly political before her Spanish adventure. She had sailed to Spain for “pure humanity’s sake.” Nonetheless, she recalled seeing two Russian films having

to do with “Lenin, etc.” and the audience applauding vigorously. Such events characterized the spirit of the medical personnel.

Some, such as Nurse Alice Elizabeth Wagoon, were sure that the United States would eventually come to the Spaniards’ aid. In February of 1938 Gallup Poll listings indicated that the indifference toward the Spanish conflict had diminished by more than ten percent since the previous year. Only fifty-two percent of the American people were neutral in regards to the war. Of the people who took a stance, an overwhelming seventy-five percent were in favor of the Loyalists and twenty-five percent favored Franco’s Rebels. Wagoon recalled “...it was only right—such is idealism. We could go, as forerunners and the powers that be would take note that the people of America cared and be persuaded to take the right step.”¹⁷ Through the letters and literature sent home by the Lincoln Brigade and the Medical Brigade, the Popular Front was making a conscious effort to change American public opinion. Unfortunately for the Loyalist cause, Wagoon and other sympathizers’ pleas had no effect on American policy makers. The United States government remained staunchly isolationist.

Even when they reached Spain, doctors and nurses tried to implement their Communist values. Dr. John Simon said, “Nothing here belongs to one individually—blankets, mess-kits—all are shared. Not even the color of one’s fecal deposits belongs to him alone—all are uniform.” He was amazed at the determination which some nationalities had to make it to the Spanish

battlefields. “One begins to understand what devotion to the proletariat means...A number of comrades came over the Alps on skis; some Czechoslovaks hiked from their country.”¹⁸

The Spanish Civil War was not an average battle fought by poor men, recruited into the army as their only chance at life advancement. Men fought solely on a volunteer basis and were highly educated, highly political, and extremely idealistic. On the subject of soldier intellect, Simon wrote home that “The most diverting occupation here is discussing philosophy. We can do this for hours at a time, because we have the brainiest young people in the world! I am here also, and their company is very congenial to me.”¹⁹ These were no ordinary soldiers.

Unfortunately, philosophy did them little good in the shell shocked Spanish countryside. Medical Brigade members reached Spain without the slightest idea as to how to defend themselves, and many refused to carry guns. Though their hospitals were targets for Nationalist bombers, they saw their mission as mainly a peaceful one—a chance to heal. Senior surgeon, Dr. William Pike recalled:

I never wore a gun, except for the first few days at Jarama. I gave my pistol away because I had learned I could carry out my orders without it. I remember how ridiculous Dr. Friedman looked waving his gun to establish his authority and then scurrying like a rabbit for shelter whenever a fascist plane appeared in the sky.²⁰

Because most medical officials, including their leader Dr. Barsky, were card carrying Communist Party members, there was a certain amount of

distrust toward those who did not express their political beliefs loudly. Dr. John Simon remembered reluctance at taking on German Dr. Bruno Lubeck, who had never taken part in politics previously. “He volunteered in Spain, where he had been living since 1934, when the war broke out. He was eyed with suspicion for the first four weeks, but because of his World War experience and his travels over the world, so that he could speak many languages, they put him in the division.”²¹

Other members of the medical effort did not agree with such attitudes. Dentist Zachary Stadt argued in a publication to the *Harvard Dental Record*, that Communism was no more a unifying cause for the Spanish War than it had been in any other war. When speaking of the war he stated vehemently:

If that makes Spain ‘red,’ then the Pope in Rome is directing the world affairs for every country... Spain is no more communistic than the United States was in 1776, or is in 1937; and many there are who feel that the efforts of such men as Roosevelt in national affairs and LaGuardia in local are no more or less than efforts directed by the Communists of the United States.²²

He argued that the Spanish people were not Communists, but simply wanted to get back their nation from the grips of fascism. This may have been partly true, but it is impossible to deny that the Communist Party was the chief organizer of the international movement to help Spain.

Hand in hand with the Brigade’s Communist beliefs, a deep sense of internationalism pervaded the 1930s for many American intellectuals. Men and women did not see themselves as citizens of the United States, but as

citizens of the world. Consequently, Franco's attack on the government of Spain symbolized a direct attack on the freedoms of all nations.

Internationalism saturated the Medical Brigade. Dr. John Simon mentioned the sense of "...cosmopolitanism...that there is here [in Spain], where orders are given, and obeyed, in German, French, English, and it often seems a few others." Medical volunteers mentioned taking lessons in Spanish and French, just so they could understand their fellow doctors. An order from the command at the hospital at Villa Paz even stated: "Warnings in Spanish, French, German, and English should be placed over every faucet in the hospital telling the patients and personnel that the water must not be used for drinking purposes or for cleaning their mouths."²³ The vast number of nations joined together in Spain created camaraderie in the hospitals. Men and women felt that they were not merely helping the Spanish, but ridding the entire world of fascism.

Furthermore, to facilitate political awareness within the ranks (including in hospitals), the International Brigades were highly educated by command of the Communist Party in Moscow. The Party appointed political commissars to each brigade, including the Medical Brigade, to educate them on proper political behaviors and the evils of both Franco and the Nationalist Insurgents. Nurse Fredericka Martin remembered their appointed political commissar who spoke in broken English. He came forward and simply stated in a Russian accent: "I am Endler, political commissar for the International Brigades in the

Madrid Sector... It will be my job to keep you supplied with newspapers and cigarettes and money needed for the hospital.”²⁴ Thus, the commissar’s job was not solely political, but also he had to keep up the morale of the troops and medics.

Hank Rubin was a UCLA medical student when he enlisted in the Lincoln Brigade. He was wounded at Jarama and sent to a hospital, where he took up work as a doctor. Before his medical duties, the Communist Party appointed him to the rank of political commissar for his Lincoln Brigade unit. He recalled that the job was not as easy as one might think. “The new assignment, I guessed, was given to me because I was a college student and assumed therefore to be smart, and because I was a YCLer [member of the Young Communist League], presumed to be stable and politically reliable.” Thus, Rubin was plunged into the world of political education with little prior knowledge of the subject. He remembered that to be a good commissar:

...meant serving as an example of courage. They had to be tough and straight-talking, being able to gain the confidence of the men while also being tender enough to take care of them. It was something like the job of an ombudsman, but an ombudsman with political and emotional character.²⁵

Hence, even if soldiers and medics had not come to Spain for political reasons, they left with plenty of political education under their belts.

Though the primary reasons for joining the Medical Brigade were political, these often overlapped with pulls corresponding with religious or racial backgrounds. Jews saw a chance to fight against Hitler’s oppression in the

same way many African Americans thirsted for retaliation against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. Even Catholicism, which was Franco's main support, served to spur on many radical Catholics in America.

Ave Bruzzichesi, a nurse from San Francisco, joined the Medical Brigade not in spite of being a Catholic, but expressly *because* of her religion. Young Bruzzichesi represented an alternative movement of Catholicism started by Dorothy Day just a few years earlier. Day previously had been known for her association with Socialists, Wobblies, Communists, and other "bohemians" began the *Catholic Worker*, a paper that advocated the possibility of social radicalism among Catholics. She tailored her publication to the masses of Irish, Italian, and Polish in New York, stating "It is time there was a Catholic paper printed for the unemployed." The paper began a liberal Catholic movement that fused social consciousness with the religion that had always been synonymous with strict anti-Communist or Socialist doctrine.²⁶ In October of 1937, the liberal newspaper put forward its firm stance on Spain: "Now tell America whether you are loyal to American Democracy or whether you are loyal to Mussolini, his abettors, the Pope and Franco in Spain and Fascism!"²⁷

Thus, Bruzzichesi followed this liberalized Catholic movement, representing a group of Americans who were as strictly opposed to Franco in Spain as their American Communist counterparts. "In the latter part of 1937, I remember going to hear Father O'Flanagan speak at the Hippodrome in NYC.

I was so impressed by his speech and his appeal for volunteer medical aid that I immediately decided to go to Spain to offer what little aid I could as an individual.”

She was angered at the Pope’s decision to align the Catholic Church with what she saw as Franco’s illegitimate regime. “Nurses in Spain before the rebellion with very few exceptions were the nuns and not one of them remained to do humanitarian work. Not one! It was difficult for me as a Catholic to believe that our priests and nuns would abandon the Spanish people to join an ambitious political leader like Franco.” Instead of complaining about such injustices, Bruzzichesi took a stance and decided to make her way to Spain. Her parents disagreed. Fredericka Martin wrote: “Her family was unwilling to let her go so did the only thing that could have stopped her, made affidavit to the State Dept. that she was their sole support, which wasn’t true of course.” This did not stop young Bruzzichesi, who left secretly without her parents’ permission.

After she returned she recounted:

There were no nuns raped nor priests murdered as the press, including our Catholic papers, would have us believe. If priests died in Spain it was only because they actively took arms against the people in churches filled with ammunition supplied by Franco. It is sad to relate this to American Catholics, but it is the truth. What a disgrace to the Catholic Church.²⁸

Along with Bruzzichesi’s liberal Catholics, the majority of the Medical Brigade was Jewish. Thirty percent of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade members were Jewish Americans, all of whom felt indignant toward Hitler’s treatment

of Jews in Germany. With the visible partnership of Franco and Hitler, came a way to fight against Nazi terror abroad. American Jews, who felt a particular need to take action, finally had their calling: Spain.

The composition of the American Medical Brigade mirrored its battlefield counterparts. In her memoir, Francis Patai remarked that “During our extensive meetings, Martin estimated that of the entire 124 AMB personnel, about half were Jewish—including these women: 28 nurses, 4 medical technicians, 1 administrator interpreter.”²⁹ Thus, doctors, nurses, and the like took to the field in a direct combat of Hitler’s anti-Semitism.

For Dr. Hank Rubin, the decision to go abroad, though influenced by his Judaism, was far less dramatic than that of some of his military colleagues. In his a memoir, he recounted the experience of growing up in Portland, Oregon while the Ku-Klux Klan was widespread. “Jews were not elected to class office and there was always a sense of outsidership.” Rubin explained his anger at the persecution of Jews in Czarist Russia and the resurgence of this in Germany under Hitler. He said simply “As a Jew and as an American I felt a responsibility to fight against anti-Semitism and fascism.” According to Rubin, the Jewish experience made them extra sensitive to oppression anywhere: “...it is moreover a moral requirement of Judaism to fight against injustice and inhumanity”. A simple responsibility and understanding of oppression fueled many Jewish Brigade members to head to Spain.³⁰

Rubin's connection with the Spanish people was fervently sealed when Quiapo de Llano, one of the four major generals who started the war against the Spanish Republic, gave a radio broadcast calling the Spanish war "a war of western civilization against the Jews of the world." The press of Germany stated that "The Spanish Republic was a Jewish communist attempt to conquer Europe for Bolshevism." Faced with such strong anti-Semitism, Rubin, along with many fellow medics, felt he had to act. "For most of us religion was not a primary motivation, although Jewishness was an important factor. I later found out, when in Spain, that most of my Jewish comrades, like me, were atheists, or at the very least agnostics."³¹

Even if it was not a major factor for joining the Medical Brigade, Judaism gave the doctors and nurses a common heritage and understanding of cultural suffering. Their achievements were lauded on the American front in Jewish journals, and letters were printed home so as to invoke Jewish contributions to the war effort. *Emanuel: Jewish and the Journal* called Dr. Leo Eloesser "A modern version of the medieval knight errant, Dr. Eloesser left his lucrative practice to give able assistance to the Loyalist cause."³²

In his biography, Eloesser expressed his distress with the rise of Franco, yet *another* Nazi dictator to enter the ranks of Hitler and Mussolini. In response he simply said: "I hate dictators and if I hate them enough I should be doing something about it." The fifty-six year old Jewish surgeon certainly *did* act on his words. Several months later he left his comfortable life in San

Francisco to become one of the head surgeons in the dangerous Spanish campaign.

Liberal Catholics and persecuted Jews were not the only groups who sought justice in combating Franco. African Americans also responded to the call for troops and medical support toward the Spanish Civil War effort. In 1935, Benito Mussolini attacked Ethiopia. This created a massive uprising in African American communities and caused a surge of pan-African sentiments in America. In the 1930s many African Americans identified with African immigrants and their ancestors in African lands. The attack created a strong pull to urge African Americans to join international struggles.

Because of Mussolini's massive aid to Franco's troops and the side of the fascists "By fighting Franco, they felt they were opposing Mussolini". African Americans, who were denied the chance to go to Ethiopia to defend their cause, were given a second chance with the call to Spain. To arouse support in 1937 the Party adopted the slogan "Ethiopia's fate is at stake on the battlefields of Spain". African Americans took this opportunity to head across the Atlantic and defend the legitimate government of Spain from Mussolini's incarnates on the Iberian Peninsula"³³

The Medical Bureau appealed to the sympathies of these African Americans, directly comparing not only the cause of anti-fascism but also the opponents' savage fighting tactics. In an interview with Dr. Barsky, he aligned the plight of the unprepared Ethiopians to that of the Spaniards, both fighting

against the same ruthless intruder. “Once a night when our ambulances were transporting wounded the fascist planes attempted to bomb them. They came close but missed. We have seen the same thing in Ethiopia. It is pure destructive terrorism!”³⁴

Many African Americans lent their combat skills to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and several followed the call of the Medical Brigade and crossing the Atlantic to treat the wounds of their fellow anti-fascists. The most famous of these, was the remarkably brave Salaria Kee, who traveled as a nurse with Dr. Barsky’s first medical unit.

Salaria Kee was a graduate from Harlem Hospital Training school, which was the only school that would accept her on account of her race. Upon graduation, the only job she could find was the undesirable assignment as a nurse in a tuberculosis ward in 1934. Later, when a flood coursed through her home state of Ohio, she tried to volunteer for the American Red Cross but again the organization denied her on account of her race. In 1937, the International Brigades accepted her without question and she sailed to Spain, the first Black woman to work alongside white nurses in an American hospital.

She was motivated to join the fight, not only because the Red Cross did not accept her, but because of Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia. “This was a terrible blow to Negroes throughout the world. Ethiopia represented the last outpost of Negro authority, of Negro self-government...Germany and Italy

and Japan conspicuously sent nothing—except poison gas with which to slaughter the Ethiopians.”³⁵

After her personal discrimination on account of her race, she better understood the suffering of the Jewish people, and connected this with Spain. Speaking of her hospital in New York she said, “we didn’t know anything about Jews. For us it was all black and white. Then a lot of doctors from Germany began telling us about Hitler and comparing what was happening to us here with the Ku Klux Klan and to the Jews over there.”³⁶ Salaria Kee joined the Brigade because for once she saw a simple means of stopping racial oppression, even if it took crossing an ocean.

Upon reaching Spain, a sort of injustice not attached to race or religion confronted Kee. During 1937, the Harlem faction of the American Medical Bureau printed an article about Kee and distributed it to encourage African American participation in the struggle. Though highly propagandistic, the article charts Kee’s basic feelings about her reasons for traveling to Spain and her experience. The article stated:

This was Salaria’s first concrete example of discrimination where race was not a factor. Here it was peasantry versus nobility. The peasants had previously accepted the belief that nothing could be done about it just as Harlem nurses had earlier accepted racial discrimination in the hospital dining room.³⁷

Kee’s fate became intertwined with that of the Spanish people. The *Daily Worker* and the *Daily World* featured her on their front pages and fellow nurses lauded her courageous dedication to the war. Fredericka Martin

referred to her as "...an invaluable asset to the nursing staff." In a transport effort, she was jailed by the fascists for seven weeks and nearly starved to death but managed to escape with the help of a sympathetic monk. She hitchhiked all the way back to Villa Paz, where she quickly resumed her work. She only went home after being wounded in an air raid and that was only because she was forced by Dr. Barsky. "That injury, however, grew worse and forced that courageous little nurse to give up the work in which she had been tirelessly engaged for a year."³⁸

Though not as publicized, Dr. Arnold Donawa, an African American oral surgeon, was also highly regarded by his fellow white doctors. Dr. Albert Byrne, who shared a room with Donawa in El Paraiso wrote that he was "quiet but always considerate. He never talked of himself, but when he did talk, his conversation was to the point." Affected by Donawa's death in Spain, Dr. Byrne later gave speeches for the American Negro Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.³⁹

Council Carter, an African American ambulance driver, highly respected by his medical peers, set out for Spain for much the same reasons as Salaria Kee. After suffering the excruciating pain of his fellow Africans in Ethiopia, he had wanted to act immediately. "So when war broke out in Spain and it became apparent that the Italians were again warring on a peaceful people, I decided to go to work for freedom and democracy by way of Spain."⁴⁰

In short, African Americans found value and acceptance in the Medical Brigade. On top of this, Nurse Salaria Kee reached a celebrity status that could only be matched by Dr. Barsky. Upon her return she gave speeches in support of Loyalist Spain and the radical press featured her in countless articles after she served. She was lauded as a hero among communities of all races.

Few other brigade members achieved such fame, but the search for romantic heroism *was* a definite reason for volunteering. Though often brushed over by historians or sheepishly admitted by veterans years later, people of all races, religions, and backgrounds shared the youthful impulse to head off to war. At the time of the Spanish Civil War, World War I was still a memory in young men's minds. During this war, before the Americans became officially involved, many young men went to Europe to drive ambulances. These World War I volunteers created an enticing image: the ambulance driver cruising across Spanish plains, ostentatiously decorated with war medals.

During World War I, the French army faced a huge problem with getting cars and qualified drivers to transport supplies and men from the front to hospitals. They turned to the United States, which was in the middle of an automobile craze. Americans from Ivy League Universities and Eastern Prep Schools volunteered for service by the dozen, creating the American Field

Service. These men were young and idealistic, and held the romantic notion of driving ambulances through the fields of battle.

Due to the fact that many were literary figures such as John Dos Pasos, Ernest Hemingway, William Slater Brown, Louis Bromfield, Malcolm Crowley, and E.E. Cummings, the romantic notions stuck. After their return, they produced books such as *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Enormous Room* that charted their wartime experiences. Prospective medical volunteers saw themselves as romantic heroes who saved lives, not ones scraping by for their own.⁴¹

California medic Hank Rubin recalled his reasons for going to fight against the Spanish Insurgents: “How much was youthful impulse, bravado? How much a feeling of a moral responsibility to society? How much because I was Jewish? These reasons were there, and much more.” He finally admitted that not all of his reasons were mixed up in political or religious beliefs. “Going to war seemed to me a step into manhood. I must confess that the imagery of personal heroism that accompanies soldiers in wartime appealed to me very much.”⁴²

Perhaps even harder to admit than the search for heroics were the more selfish or personal needs of self fulfillment expressed by several members of the Medical Brigade. Some nurses felt they ought to serve because they saw themselves as not needed anywhere else. Helen Williams, who was 26, claimed “I have no family and so I feel it my duty to go...this is no ordinary

war...this is a war without honor.” Mabel Foy who was unattached to any organization, “...saw the opportunity to serve because Benicasim had no laboratory.”⁴³ Feeling no pull in any other duty, their reasons were simple, yet compelling.

Dentist Jack Klein, claimed to be highly political, but thirty years later, he admitted to Fredericka Martin that his “...home life and the attempt to establish a practice in this environment were incompatible so that I suppose that subconsciously Spain served as a way out for me.”⁴⁴ Klein’s underlying motive of self-fulfillment proved that at least a few medical officials were not solely interested in politics and religion, but held onto deeper, more personal reasons for joining the hospitals.

Whether it was self-fulfillment, outrage at Nazi Germany, or the answer to the call of the Communist Party, idealism held together the medical effort in Spain. Men and women *chose* to leave their warm American homes to struggle with dimly lit operating rooms, scarce anesthetics, not to mention a Rebel bomb around every corner. They may have harbored secret notions of romanticism sparked by nostalgia from a prior war, but when faced with reality, they certainly rose to the task. In one of the most highly politicized wars the world has ever seen, doctors and nurses were there not only to bandage legs and cure tuberculosis. They went with one common goal: to heal the wounds of fascism and to keep Franco’s fury from spreading throughout the world.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER ONE

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- ⁵ "A Surgeon Goes to War: the Unpublished Memoir of Dr. Edward Barsky" found in: Tamiment Library, New York University, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (henceforth referred to as ALBA), Edward Barsky Papers, Box 5, Folder 4, 11-16.
- ⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle*. Feb. 10, 1977. "The Angels of the Last 'Pure War'." 22.
- ⁷ Mildred Rackley's quotation from: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 12. For more information on Rackley see: Peter Carroll. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. (Stanford: 1994) 80.
- ⁸ *New York Times*. Jan. 17, 1937. "Hospital Group Sails for Spain."
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- ¹⁰ For more information on the battle of Jarama refer to: Peter Carroll. *Odyssey*. 98-106.
- ¹¹ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 12, Folder 2.
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- ¹³ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 7, Folder 30.
- ¹⁴ Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks. *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade From the Spanish Civil War*. (New York and London: 1996) 88.
- ¹⁵ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 9, Folder 38.
- ¹⁶ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 245.
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- ¹⁸ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 93; 88.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*. 91.
- ²⁰ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 2.
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- ²³ Commentary by John Simon: Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 88; Command from Villa Paz: ALBA, Toby Jensky Papers, Box 1, folder 2.
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- ²⁵ Hank Rubin. *Spain's Cause Was Mine: a Memoir of an American Medic in the Spanish Civil War*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: 1997) 83-84.
- ²⁶ Nancy L. Roberts. *The Catholic Worker Movement: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*. (Albany: 1984) 3.
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- ²⁸ Commentary by Bruzzichesi along with Commentary by Fredericka Martin: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 5, Folder 24.
- ²⁹ ALBA, Papers of Frances Patai, Box 5, Folder 13.
- ³⁰ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 32; Hank Rubin. *An American Medic*. 14-16.
- ³¹ Hank Rubin. *An American Medic*. 17, 14.
- ³² *Emanuel: Jewish and the Journal*. July 22, 1938. Found in: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 13, Folder 37.
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- ³⁴ American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. "From A Hospital in Spain" (New

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³⁵ The Negro Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain." (New York: 1937) 3.

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³⁹ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.

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⁴² Hank Rubin. *An American Medic*. 3-12.

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CHAPTER TWO
HOSPITAL LIFE: OPTIMISM, TRAUMA, AND THE DAILY GRIND

“Beds full—ether gone—gangrene sets in...”¹
 -American Medical Bureau publication

By April of 1938, after fifteen months of constant service, the seemingly tireless Dr. Edward Barsky began to lose his zeal for the war effort. His feelings embodied the larger sense of exhaustion that was passing through the members of the Medical Brigade. In his unpublished memoir he recalled:

I became more and more fatigued. In the few minutes between cases, I went into the sterilizing room where our mechanic, Carl Rahman, was keeping the old sterilizers going by super ingenuity—he was on his job forty hours, because we did not dare relieve him. I knelt on the floor huddling up against the hot steaming machine, trying to get a little warmth. I admitted to myself that our difficulties might be insurmountable. How could we go on with so many things essential for hospital lacking? How could our nurses stand the strain? And then the call back to the operating room for the next case.²

Dr. Barsky’s exhaustion reflected the plummeting morale within the Brigade. One must remember that these men were not the glorified heroes that the radical press made them out to be, but real living, breathing individuals with personal problems just like anyone else. Some fell in love, others quarreled amongst themselves, and all were afraid of death. Looking past the cheerful letters home, the real story of the Medical Brigade fell into place.

Dr. Barsky, the leader of the Medical Brigade, showcased the tensions between the public persona and the private lives of medics. For example, on

April 10th, his colleague Dr. Leo Eloesser observed the change in Barsky's disposition in a candid letter to a fellow comrade. "Well, we got into Barcelona and found Barsky. He looks like a wreck, so tired that he can scarcely drag himself about, and with all his old spirit gone out of him, but sticking on and helping like the brave scout that he is."³

Just a week before, in late March of 1938, Barsky addressed a letter to a surgeon and friend in New York. He spoke optimistically of having "a good sleep" and a "cup of good American coffee"⁴ before speaking about the problems the hospitals faced. In his letter, he mentioned the trying operations, and the lack of supplies, but never broached the subject of the Loyalists' military losses. He hinted at no demoralization, no exhaustion, and definitely no loss of spirit.

Barsky knew that in such a highly political war, the Popular Front was not interested in hearing about a lost cause. Medical personnel's main goal when sending correspondence home was not only to raise money for supplies but above all to lift the embargo of Spain: to change American public policy. Thus, even though many doctors and nurses were exhausted, cold, and hopeless, they kept their correspondence light and happy.

Tensions between the public face of the American Medical Brigade and the reality at the front grated on the nerves of surgeons, nurses, and ambulance drivers alike. Though trauma may have been high, this fact did not leave the Spanish hospitals. Letters home were kept light because they were often

published in radical papers and circulated around at Communist Party meetings. On the other hand, memoirs and letters not directed to Popular Front organizations often took a different tone on the fighting and trauma of war. This caused a disparaging rift between what was written home and what actually took place in hospitals—optimism and trauma went hand in hand.

Through its organized system of political commissars, the Communist Party kept men and women in Spain educated and optimistic. In a letter home, physician Barney Malbrin touched on the education that the troops and doctors received to keep their spirits high. “In regards to the educational posters, the government is doing a fine job. There are slogans on hygiene, mental hygiene, culture, and politics, which are succinct and educational.”⁵ The educational posters to which Malbrin refers were not only meant to keep doctors and nurses clean and professional but to remind them of their cause. Education given by the Communist Party and the Spanish Left helped medical volunteers from being discouraged in the face of tragedy and death.

Doctors and nurses typically sent letters home to family and friends the express objective of conveying an upbeat attitude of victory. In March of 1937, after receiving a critical letter from a friend, Nurse Lini Fuhr wrote: “Kate gave me the impression in her letter that things did not go so well in Spain—that must be the doings of the capitalist press—we are so firmly entrenched, *they will never conquer Spain.*”⁶ Hospital workers kept an optimistic view of the war, and furthermore, if the Loyalist army was doing

well, supporters were more likely to donate money and rally their cause on the American front.

In February of 1937, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade experienced its first baptism of fire at the Battle of Jarama. Inexperienced, untrained, and severely outnumbered, Loyalist commanders used the Lincoln Brigade as shock troops against Franco's Rebels. The losses were massive. Out of the 600 members of the Brigade, 300 were dead and another 100 were wounded. An entire third of the American division was decimated in a brutal massacre of troops. The Medical Brigade felt the repercussions of the battle in full force. American troops were rushed to the American hospital at Romeral, which had been established merely days before. Doctors, who had no idea how to deal with wartime injuries were expected to treat the wounds of hundreds of soldiers.

Still, letters home remained optimistic. Shortly after the battle of Jarama, Nurse Celia Greenspan Seborer spoke assuredly of the Loyalist triumph. "However, one thing is certain—our men are advancing on all fronts; we don't expect this to end in 2-3 days but we are hopeful that in a few weeks- 2-3 months it will be just a matter of wiping up the remains."⁷

Around the same time, Dr. Malbrin, alluded to the fact that the Nationalists were at the end of their ropes:

The fascists must be getting desperate having failed to demoralize our army... their agents seem to be resorting to the most trivial forms of sabotage. Yesterday we opened a box for a flask for intravenous fluid and found the set nicely set up but empty. The next day we opened a box of digitalis and found everything in ship shape order except that that bottled contained nothing at all...⁸

In truth, the Nationalist forces were *not* demoralized, and their backing from Hitler and Mussolini allowed them to carry on the war without hesitation for more than another year.

Under the influence of political commissars, who received their information from the Communist Party, Medical Brigade members kept their outward optimism even in the face of enormous losses of American troops (such as at Jarama) and did not hint at personal demoralization. A pamphlet published by the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy in 1937 summarizes such sentiments in an anonymous statement from a doctor. “Franco may win the war (may! mind you!) but never will he conquer such determined spirits. It is obvious that he has no popular support.”⁹

However, as the war carried on and victims began pouring into the American hospitals, Dr. Malbrin began to focus not on pure optimism over victory, but on the slaughter of the dignified Spanish people:

I suppose it is a thing of amazement to find that the people here are so confident of the future, are so little deterred by the murderous bombardments of children and women. In fact, the reaction to this criminal activity generally is to create closer unity between all forces, to improve efficiency and output even more.¹⁰

Post Jarama, when members of the Medical Brigade experienced the traumatic truth of war first hand, a common trend of optimistic embellishment emerged. In turn, the Popular Front converted the medical experience into a romantic vision of curing the wounded against all odds or dodging bombs in an ambulance full of grateful soldiers. Upon being moved closer to the front

and closer to the scene of imminent danger, Nurse Lini Fuhr laughed it off in a letter home. “Very shortly we hope to have this like our other place. Much nearer the scene of action now—a little too near for comfort—*c’est la guerre*—”¹¹

Likewise, lab technician Anne Taft spoke of instilling courage in troops while she treated them. “What right had I to be frightened? I who have just tasted what they have long lived through? With my heart pounding almost as loudly as the roar of the motors above, I spoke to them. I told them they must be brave.”¹² Such statements were sent home and often published in radical papers like the *Daily Worker* or the *New Masses*, which lauded the American Medical Brigade members as heroes.

Dr. Leo Eloesser, the experienced surgeon from San Francisco, suggested that perhaps the jovial nature of the medical staff was meant to cover their underlying fear. “Some thirty or so medical officers; all kinds of men, but all brave and smiling and uncomplaining. And truckloads of soldiers going past on the way to the front, singing and laughing. Nothing of desperation or panic. One wonders what they feel in their hearts.”¹³ Dr. Eloesser is the first doctor to voice the tension between the singing soldiers and their inner fear.

Nevertheless, to keep with the upbeat attitude of the Popular Front, such feelings would remain securely in their hearts. Aside from confidence in the Loyalist cause and extreme claims of bravery, nurses and doctors enjoyed writing about great medical feats and miracles that took place under

impossible circumstances in Spanish hospitals. Nurse Anne Taft used the righteousness of the Loyalist cause to account for medical innovations. “It is surprising that in spite of all the difficulties, our mortality rate was very low, and we are astounded at the unexpected recovery of some of our most serious cases. But the will to live is great, and all are fighting for a better world.”¹⁴

Largely similar, the Medical Bureau’s pamphlet “From a Hospital in Spain,” boasted that “...one day in the first week of the American hospital, 900 casualties were treated with the loss of only a single life.”¹⁵

To gain support and money for their cause, medical personnel described hospitals as little utopias of medical healing, not as frigid, unlit targets for Nationalist bombs. In a letter home to her sister, nurse Toby Jensky reported:

There is a nice comradely atmosphere at this place—the patients and personnel work together, on our staff are patients who are here for a long convalescence—they volunteer to work and are given jobs that they are fitted for. One is admitting clerk, another electrician etc. Everyone speaks a different language and anything you say has to be translated 3 or 4 times and after a huddle all’s well and the work goes on.¹⁶

Highlighting their technological advances, Anne Taft compared the American hospitals to those established by the Spanish Loyalists. “...we’ve been told the Americans have the best hospitals in Spain, and that they realize that it is due to the efficiency of the nurses and doctors.”¹⁷ Nurse Toby Jensky said, “As a matter of fact the two big hopes the boys have are beating fascism and if & when they get wounded to be sent to the American hospital.”¹⁸

Celia Greenspan Seborer made the American hospitals sound more like a summer camp than a place of surgery and lingering death. “It is really a wonderful experience to be here and live thru this—to take part in this process of helping men back to health. With comrades such as one meets here—comrades from Spain or Germany or France or Italy or whatever country you care to choose, we simply can’t be beaten.”¹⁹

Similarly, Dr. Klein, an American dentist wrote:

Working at the front isn’t much different that working back home in Brooklyn...Instead of the telephone that would inevitably ring at the wrong time, there can be heard here the hum and whine of bullets. Very often of course, I’ve got to very suddenly move my ‘office’ when the bullets start coming too close.²⁰

Such light treatment of wartime horror sent the message of victory home and encouraged further participation in the war effort. No one wants to pour money and time into a lost cause, so the Medical Brigade made sure to outline their cause in an optimistic sense of triumph.

On the other hand, though the optimism of medics was largely exaggerated to create a sense of security in their cause, the Spanish Civil War did provide several positive medical innovations, both in its treatment of personnel and in the advancement of technology. For example, Dr. John Posner, a dental surgeon wrote an article home in *Dental Outlook*, sharing the sense of equality he was shown in the field by other surgeons. Classically, dental surgery had been seen as of lesser value than “real” surgery on the hospital front, but Dr. Pitts (head of the American hospital at Albacete) provided his colleague Dr.

Posner the same considerations he would any other medic crucial to the curing of wounded soldiers. “He has shown himself to be the best friend American dentistry has in Spain, by according me every possible consideration, and insisting that dentistry be recognized as standing shoulder to shoulder with medicine, with equal rights and privileges.”²¹

In her unpublished memoir, Fredericka Martin also began to pay Spanish assistants “to inspire the regular and punctual appearance of nurses’ aides and cleaning women at the time they were wanted...volunteer village girls and women came when the spirit prompted or they had spare time—not regularly when most needed to assist the nurses.”²² Thus, the American hospitals were run more as corporations with reliable jobs than other Spanish hospitals, which were volunteer endeavors at best.

On the technological front, due to harsh circumstances, the American Medical Brigade was forced to make quick advances to accommodate frequent bombings and necessary mobility of patients. Dr. Edward Barsky came up with a new means of treating the wounded, which he wrote about in the *Evening Journal* and the *New York American*. “Fragments are removed from the wound and the muscles closed, leaving any lining of the chest cavity to be healed by nature. During the World War, it was the practice to also sew the lining.” The Spanish Civil War, with the technological advances of Franco’s Rebels (supplied by Hitler and Mussolini), forced Barsky to deal with new and brutal wounds. “The new procedure causes much less

shock...We have used it on several hundred wounded and have not had one death on the operating table. Recovery occurs in three to six weeks.”²³

An auto chair, which was donated to the Loyalists by the French, also represented a new medical advance. The auto chair was a small, portable operating room on wheels. It could move up to the front without trouble and therefore emergency surgeries could be performed on site. In his memoir, Dr. Barsky described it as:

...a surgery on wheels. In it a surgeon, if he trains himself to stand still, can operate in perfect comfort under the most adverse conditions. He can move in his auto-chair as close to the front lines as he dares...The use of the auto-chair as demonstrated in the Spanish war revolutionizes our previous conception of front line surgery.²⁴

Barsky dedicated his time to his auto-chair and spent the second half of his stay in Spain energetically flitting from front line to battlefield, operating on soldiers the moment they were wounded.

The American Medical Bureau also lauded the innovation of the auto-chair along with Dr. Barsky’s ingenuity in its publication “One Year in Spain,” which was circulated among Popular Front organizations throughout the country. “It has never been seen in any former war—a hospital on wheels. Under the direction of Dr. Edward K. Barsky, assisted by engineers and medical men, this hospital on wheels constructed to follow the quickly shifting lines in Spain.”²⁵

Such innovations served to improve the spirits of both doctors and the wounded on the front. Though Medical Brigade publications acted like

optimism ran through the hospitals like an infectious disease, in reality typhoid was much more prevalent. On a daily basis, medical staff had to deal with screams of agony, cases of shell-shock, suicide, and self-inflicted wounds. Under such circumstances it was difficult to keep a positive attitude about the wartime effort, and many doctors and nurses reported horrors that would haunt them long after their brief stay on the Spanish medical front.

The propaganda of optimistic good will that spread through the Spanish military camps and trickled home to American via correspondence often had an opposite affect on hospital officials who were severely lacking in supplies. Dr. Frank Ayer mentioned, “Meanwhile Spanish newspapers repeated the news of the Americans’ arrival with photos to hearten their Spanish readers with this symptom of American friendship and support. The publicity raised contrary feelings in internationals toiling in hospitals with not even rags enough for bandages.”²⁶

Hospitals were ill-equipped, understaffed, and teeming with wounded on beds, floors, and any empty spaces. Dr. Eloesser described his operating room as “...warm and suffocating. The air is a mixture of burnt alcohol, steam, and unpleasant surgical smells, mainly iodine and fresh blood.”²⁷

Sterilization was a constant challenge, as hospital staff lacked alcohol and iodine. Mary Louise Platkin, a nurse, complained constantly of unsanitary conditions in her unpublished memoir. “30 wounded soldiers came in. And this is what was thrown together: Beds, a few days dishes, towels, no water,

no heat, everything is dirty, and so are the soldiers.”²⁸ As the winter encroached on their operations, hot water was reserved for sterilization, operations and patient use. Consequently, many medics complained of being in a state of constant filth. Doctor John Simon remarked, “I never believed that one could be so dirty, certainly not more than 2 days, and live.”²⁹

Aside from technical difficulties caused by lack of supplies and inadequate facilities, many doctors were inexperienced in field practices. In their extreme necessity for qualified personnel, doctors gave medical students full charge of operations and of course doctors who had never left the comfort of their Manhattan operating rooms were suddenly expected to make due with rags for bandages and straw ticks to sleep on at night. Head nurse Fredericka Martin commented: “Errors were plentiful—these were mainly people from larger cities who had never camped out before. They learned about food and bad camouflage, what to do when planes on the way to bomb nearby towns, circled above them.”³⁰

The Spanish Civil War marked particular difficulties for medical officials because hospitals, which had previously been off limits to enemy bombings, were seen as open targets. Fredericka Martin observed, “Behind the hospitals, a few fields away from the largest one, a former seminary was the railroad station. Never were hospitals better aligned targets for bombers.”³¹ A red cross now symbolized a bomb target rather than medical asylum. Thus, as soon as a hospital was soundly established, it would have to be evacuated

without warning and medical teams had to make the new place inhabitable all over again.

Nurse Anne Taft commented on the logistical problems such as keeping things sterilized in the case of frequent moves. “You see, we must keep everything sterile at all times, because during an attack, we have no time to stop and boil instruments.”³² She went on to illustrate the pain that was inflicted on patients and medics alike when suddenly a hospital had to be picked up and moved to a completely different place. “And all the time wounded were brought in, cold, in shock, bleeding, dying... Words cannot describe the horror of it! Things were so difficult. Not enough beds, instruments, linen, or other equipment.”³³

Constant relocation and retreat took its toll on the minds of the medical staff. Dr. William Pike recalled the trauma that was associated with the retreat of the Teruel front that lasted from January through June of 1938:

Nurses and doctors fearful and hysterical. (I believe the only reason I didn't break down was because I had the responsibility of holding the groups together and so much to do trying to prevent demoralization from spreading.) Barsky was in deep depression, almost demoralized but so quiet; it broke your heart to see his sad, quiet dignity. Abe Friedman went to pieces—made a pest of himself, was completely demoralized.³⁴

After the traumatic experience, Dr. Pike had Barsky evacuated along with Nurses Helen Freeman and Salaria Kee due to severe anxiety and exhaustion. Barsky took the time to conduct a speaking tour for several months, gaining medical support for Spain and returned soon after.

Adding to anxiety, during the Spanish Civil War, the Nationalists utilized the new tactic of bombing entire civilian populations to root out a Loyalist band or simply to invoke fear. Dr. John Simon remembered a sense of youthful intrigue at the first sound of bombs thundering in the distance. “When the planes first came, I was not scared, merely interested—when for a while nothing happened. I was even disappointed... But after a neighboring building was bombed, I stumbled thru the wreckage, listening to the groans of the wounded...”³⁵ Later a sense of fearful anticipation became associated with the appearance of airplanes on the horizon. As he saw more and more desolation and wounded, the demoralized Dr. Simon just raised his head at the skies and said, “Famous last words: Those planes are ours.”³⁶

Waiting for a bomb to hit the hospital at all times was too much for many hospital workers to handle. Dr. Barsky later explained that “It is a terrible sensation to wait like that—inside—and wait for the next bomb. Will it strike—won’t it?”³⁷ Bombs directly endangered the lives of medical officials, often injuring both patients and their caregivers.

Nationalists would bomb anything that so much as resembled a hospital structure, making it hard to disguise facilities and dangerous to stay in them for long periods of time. Dr. Freeman described his time in command on the front in the summer of 1938. “Those were fierce hot days, the fronts were quiet. We busied ourselves digging latrines, treating our dysenteries, learning

Spanish and getting acquainted with our soldiers. Once our front dressing station was bombed; our personnel barely escaped with their skins.”³⁸

Under many circumstances, hospital volunteers were not nearly as lucky. When two American hospitals were bombed at Tاراcon, Sonia Merims was among the wounded. When *New York Times* reporter Herbert Matthews reported the story the United States in “2 Hospitals Razed in Rebel Bombings.” Matthews noted that the bombings did not kill any medical personnel but “...there was a great material loss to British and American medical units. Several ambulances and all the valuable surgical and medical material in the two hospitals were destroyed.”³⁹

However, not all doctors were the picture of brave selflessness when confronted with explosions and shrapnel coming from all directions. They reacted as normal human beings faced with a painful death. During the Tاراcon bombings, Dr. Bloom fled the scene at the first sound of planes. According to Fredericka Martin, Dr. Bloom ran away screaming “Run for your life!” The cool-headed Dr. Barsky simply turned to him and said “What did you come here for?” Dr. Bloom’s reply was “I came here to save lives, not to lose my own.”⁴⁰ And Bloom ran for cover. His reaction displayed the misgivings many doctors took into their duty on the Spanish front. They believed they could stay in sheltered hospitals and tend the wounded with no harm to themselves, but the Spanish Civil War was a new kind of war. It

showcased the blurred boundary between the battle front and the home front, something that would become more evident in World War II.

Such conditions for hospital workers made operations and surgical procedures risky at best. A lack of proper facilities, supplies, or trained personnel, forced medics to improvise. Many doctors on the Spanish front shared Dr. John Simon's attitude of futility. "This night we worked over apparently hopeless cases—operating—operating—treating shock—groans of the wounded—the transfusionist running from one operating room to another—and we kept going all the time."⁴¹

Lighting was a constant problem. Even if the hospital was equipped with proper electricity, it could not afford to light up for fear of Nationalist bombers. Gruesome operations took place without anesthetic and with only a single flickering bulb above the operating table. Dr. Eloesser described his initial horror upon completing a surgery under such drastic conditions:

He has had a local anesthetic, but is quite conscious and is talking to them. They are cutting his arm off; cutting through the strip of skin that it dangles from, and cutting off the dirty shreds of flesh and the dirty ends of bones. There is a single electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling of this room which emits a faint glow.⁴²

Doctors had to be on their feet at all times and ready for massive shipments of wounded men. Dr. Irving Busch, who worked for a time with Dr. Barsky on the American mobile unit listed the tasks that had to be preformed all in a days work. : "Some of these patients will require blood transfusions, others are to receive shock treatment. Some cases will have plaster-of-paris casts

applied, others airplane splints, and then be sent on after a little rest to a hospital in the rear.”

However shocking such conditions might have been at first, doctors and nurses quickly became used to working in low to no light with frostbite nipping at their fingers. Hospital interpreter Mildred Rackley recalled: “One night in the middle of an operation, the battery went dead. All of us ran for our flashlights, and with the feeble glimmer of eight flashlights, Dr. Barsky finished removing a shattered kidney.⁴³”

Dr. Eloesser told a similar story in an address to the American Medical Bureau. “A surgeon in uniform and a medical student are on their knees beside one of the wounded: by the light of a candle stuck onto the floor they are trying to give him a blood transfusion.”⁴⁴ This was a rare example in which a doctor used the Medical Brigade’s poor state and complete lack of supplies to inspire donations from America. Instead of concentrating on the war’s optimistic future and the righteousness of his cause, Eloesser outlined the true needs of the Spanish fight. If they did not receive supplies, their efforts to heal the Spaniards’ wounds were all for naught.

After a year of treating patients constantly, exhaustion took its toll. Dr. Barsky lost his spirit along with other doctors and nurses. Many nurses fell ill and begged to return home, while Dr. Byrne succumbed to tuberculosis: “After operating for six days and nights without hardly a rest between cases,

he was taken ill. He was delirious for 5 days...When he appeared he was just able to walk.”⁴⁵

The task of manning a wartime hospital was extremely demanding, and mental trauma caused a whole range of problems ranging from suicide to self-inflicted wounds. Many medics, though they had worked in a city hospital, had never experienced traumatic death first hand. Dr. John Simon recalled, “There were a number of corpses. Several of the boys told me they had their first experience touching dead bodies then and were horrified at first.”⁴⁶

Doctors and nurses became attached to patients and found it hard to separate their medical work from strong feelings of camaraderie. Writing for the Medical Brigade’s pamphlet, “From a Hospital in Spain,” Lini Fuhr described the bond felt between herself and the soldiers she treated. “There is nothing impersonal about it. These patients are a part of us. When they suffer, we suffer and learn to hate more. There is a terrific emotional drain always.”⁴⁷

Fredericka Martin described the horror she felt while watching a stretcher carrying a supposedly dead man began to convulse violently.

Among the corpses laid out for burial they had seen a body move. It was a Spanish Captain, just barely alive. They had seen the involuntary tremors of a dying man. In a desperate effort to save him, Dr. Barsky operated. The Captain’s aides came and waited beside him till he died.⁴⁸

Perhaps more disturbing to doctors and nurses, the trauma they had first experienced at frequent deaths began to subside. After watching countless soldiers die, Dr. Barsky recalled being able to push aside his feelings of pity toward soldiers:

I don't mean to say that we became hard-hearted. In moments of rest we communed with ourselves in sorrow. But we had to keep ourselves efficient. As long as I stayed in Spain, after that first experience, I took each case as a task; a task which required every bit of my skill and judgment and whatever courage I had. I tried to exclude emotional feeling.⁴⁹

Such experiences took their own psychological toll on Dr. Barsky and his fellow hospital volunteers. "The horror—the misery—the feeling of impotence that we had—the sense of resignation and acceptance—all these would make a terrible tale."⁵⁰ His version of the medical efforts was far less optimistic than the letters home reporting heroism and medical miracles. Official Medical Brigade publications failed to carry this tale home to the Popular Front. Bombings and lack of supplies were mentioned to inspire donations, but the Popular Front kept the true trauma of medical personnel quiet.

As the fighting continued, many doctors and nurses reported serious psychological trauma brought on by exhaustion, stress, or deep sorrow. Dr. Barsky sent Nurse Sally Lifland home due to traumatic stress. In a letter from the American Friends of Spanish Democracy to Fredericka Martin, it was reported that "Her mental condition is not good, due to worry over the disappearance of her husband while fighting with the Lincoln Brigade."⁵¹

Doctors diagnosed fifty-year-old Dr. Bloom with premature senility after he nearly poisoned Dr. Florence Pike to death at Albacete. Dr. Pike thought he had control of the situation and "—gave strict orders he [Dr. Bloom] was not to be allowed in the pharmacy—gave him the job of chlorinating the drinking

water—if he put too much in, water would only taste bad.” He realized this was a mistake when Dr. Bloom poisoned his water with atrophine. “He had gotten into the pharmacy, made up the atropine solution, mistook grams for grains. So, instead of 1/150 grain, I had imbibed 1/150 grams. (1/120 can kill). I was bedridden for two days.”⁵²

With a tinge of regret, Dr. John Simon reported, “I am on guard over a comrade who tried to hang himself because ordered to the front tomorrow. Such is the life of a medical officer.”⁵³ Attempted suicides did not only affect military officers but also the medical staff who had to deal with the horrors of painful operations and traumatic deaths.

Honey Hershkowitz suffered from severe psychological stress throughout her tenure as a nurse in the brigade. She asked Dr. Barsky to return home, but he refused her several times. When she finally reached America, “...she attempted to kill herself. She tried to strangle herself [by hanging] at Beth Israel, then tried to drown herself at camp... Morris Kornbloom and her mother took her out of the hospital and then she jumped out the window...”⁵⁴ The psychological strain of hospital front work had been too much for her to bear.

Hershkowitz was not the only Brigade member to feel the immense burden of psychological strain and post-war trauma. After the nurse’s return, Dr. Barsky commented on the “problem of maintaining mental hygiene in war.” He began to notice how much the spirit of his patients reflected that of his

staff and later observed that “...it was all a question of morale, of mental health. From there it was only a short step to considering means by which this superior state of mind produced automatically by victory could be made a permanent state of mind unaffected by the immediate fortunes of war.”⁵⁵

Political commissars were supposed to keep morale high and usually gave a somewhat skewed view of battles to induce optimism, but as the Loyalists began to lose battle after battle, not even the commissars could keep up the morale of the soldiers and doctors.

Much to his own horror, Barsky began to see a number of patients with self-inflicted wounds. He faced the challenge of whether to send the patients back to the front, keep them in the hospital, or cart them off to prison. Barsky described his first contact with a self-inflicted wound, when a young Spaniard was brought in who had lost all hope of victory and feared nothing more than returning to the site of battle. The boy was eager to tell him of his infliction and recounted that “One dark night I was creeping out of the trench. It was very dark. Suddenly I encountered a Fascist soldier; in the struggle he shot me in the hand.”⁵⁶ Dr. Barsky knew it was not a true story—the boy’s sector was not even close to the front. To his own personal dismay, Barsky sent the boy to jail after the loss of a finger.

As if suicide and self-inflicted wounds were not enough, Dr. Barsky also had to deal with several cases of shell shock. He remembered another young boy, American and red headed, who would utter nothing but “bombs, bombs,

bombs.” The boy had come from the Jarama front where it was bitter cold and trenches were filled with water, not to mention the merciless bombings overhead. Dr. Barsky felt that “The emotions of fear, anger, determination were rampant within him and apparently fear gained the upper hand. Perhaps he saw the wounded soldiers being carried out of the trench into a hospital and comparative safety.”⁵⁷

Dealing with such stressful situations day after day, psychological trauma began to affect the medical personnel. After the Spanish Civil War, the Medical Brigade returned to America with a range of mental difficulties and psychological problems. More than twenty years after the fight, Fredericka Martin sent out a questionnaire to fellow American Medical Brigade participants in attempts to compile their histories. When asked what they got out of the experience in Spain, most replied with standard answers such as “It was the best experience of my life,” or “I was fully committed to the cause of the valiant Spanish people.” Nonetheless, ambulance driver Carl Rahman answered frankly about the toll it took on his later life, exclaiming “It damn near ruined me psychologically!” Dr. Richard Chodoff also answered free of Popular Front slogans. He simply stated that he had come home from Spain with “Political awareness, knowledge, and frankly some cynicism.”⁵⁸

Along with the trauma and horror of military life, medical staff also managed to find time for fun and games. Such activities ranged from dances, practical jokes, and scandalous love affairs to inter-brigade bickering. There

was a disparaging rift between the personal and public lives of the Medical Brigade, but doctors were not always running from bombs and operating under dimly flickering light bulbs.

Imagine a room full of giggling nurses trying to fall asleep to the sound of fascist bombs in the distance. Nurse Toby Jensky noted, “In fact we seem to be having a pretty good time always—even when we’re so tired we can hardly move—we all lie in our beds and somebody starts wise cracking and before long we’re all practically hysterical and throwing everything and anything.” Her jovial tone went on to describe a time in which Anne Taft, head of the nursing staff, had woken her with a swipe of pilfered witch hazel over her nose. “I told her what I thought of her and told her that the only way she could atone for her sin was to make me some cold cocoa...”⁵⁹

Small amenities such as clean sheets caused daily joy for the nursing staff. After complaining endlessly of their dirty bedclothes and uniforms, Nurse Fredericka Martin was so overjoyed at the reception of clean sheets that “The little Spanish girl who is responsible for the linen room and I danced a jig and were very dignified.”⁶⁰ Her laughing manner shows that though they were under tremendous physical and mental strain, Medical Brigade members were still able to appreciate the small amenities thrown their way.

To celebrate such joys, they threw parties on holidays, birthdays, Loyalist victories, and even for no reason at all to keep their spirits high. Fredericka Martin wrote: “Nov. seventh we are going to have a fiesta of grandiose

proportions... Speeches and singing in the afternoon. Coffee at four with or without cake. Supper at six and dancing in the evening.”⁶¹ Later she admitted that the party was as much for the medical staff as for their waking patients.

Dr. Julius Hene wrote in a letter home about the Brigade’s newest canine addition. “Our medical corps has adopted a young puppy which we call Mañana. The boys have dressed him up in a swell uniform and he is being taught all the tricks worthy of the best proletarian dog tamers.”⁶² Fascist bombs were probably sounding in the distance, but the story of the Medical Brigade would be incomplete without including their daily joys along with the trauma associated with war.

On the other hand, not all doctors were the picture of comportsment and responsibility. Dr. Sandor Voros, who was taking a trip to inspect the front hospitals, wrote of how drunk he became in the presence of an ambulance driver. “A Danish ambulance driver—slightly drunk—former seaman—traveled in States. You’re from Cleveland? Have a drink. Have another one. I got another bottle. Have some more. I shouldn’t. I haven’t eaten all day. That’s nothing. Will make you forget it.” After a few comradely swigs of brandy too many, Voros resumed his inspection. He was then confronted by Dr. Chrome, the chief of the sanitary services division. While Chrome was lecturing him on the intricacies of front-line sanitation, Voros recalled a tinge of embarrassment at his state of inebriation. “Had difficult time to speak distinctly to formulate questions clearly to prevent him from discovering he

was spending his precious time on a man in advanced stage of intoxication.”⁶³

Drink was a form of escapism for many medics, but it also promoted comradely interactions, and times of social drinking lightened the tense mood provoked by the crashes of shells around them.

Along with the daily joys of dances and naming puppies, doctors and nurses also found time to find significant fault in each other and fight amongst themselves. Political ideals of communalism clashed with the reality of bossy doctors who were used to being treated like gods. Energetic hospital interpreter Mildred Rackley expressed her disgust at the high-and-mighty conduct of many doctors:

Unfortunately we have too many surgeons here now and they act like prima donnas. It's caused an undercurrent of ill feeling and dissension that gets on my nerves. Too bad, because individually each one is very nice, but although they are firm anti-fascists or even communists, they can't seem to remember that they aren't working in a bourgeoisie society now, but under revolutionary conditions.⁶⁴

This underlined the tensions that many members of the Medical Brigade felt between old social relations and new revolutionary ideals.

Likewise, the Communist feelings of international camaraderie between fellow nations did not always play out on the battle field. At times, relations suffered between the American Medical Brigade and Spanish medics. On one hand, young local girls provided excellent nursing assistants and youths could be employed as stretcher bearers. Dr. Barsky commented with satisfaction that on the Cordoba front he had gathered a significant amount of young nurses and helpers to train for the establishment of a hospital. On the other hand, in

Taracon, “The Spanish nurses refused to take orders from the Americanos. Eddie [Barsky] concluded that the only reason they had wanted us to come to Tarancon was to get hold of our equipment.”⁶⁵

Such problematic relations between the Spanish government and the International Brigades made it difficult for either side to function. Americans, who had previously given up equipment to Spaniards and distributed it among hospitals, began to think in new ways. Dr. Pitts wrote a letter to the American Medical Bureau, suggesting that:

All equipment going to Spain should be sent to the American hospital. If there is any surplus this can be sent to other hospitals. Mobile hospital units should work out of this base hospital. During an offensive they can be sent to the various fronts and during periods of comparative inactivity they may come back to the base.⁶⁶

Such statements made sure that the American hospitals would be fully equipped, but also worked to deepen feelings of animosity between the Spanish and American hospitals.

Clashes were not limited between Spain and America. Inside American hospitals, personal quarrels raged between the doctors who were supposed to be setting an example for their medical staff. Dr. William Pike stated: “I remember I also had a quarrel with Barsky—when I had to demand an ambulance and driver from him so that I could locate in various towns hospitals for our surgical team and maintain liaison etc...”⁶⁷ He complained of how Barsky, who was generally regarded as the poster child for the medical effort, was rather controlling of his staff.

Nonetheless, Dr. Byrne, a surgeon of lesser standing than Pike or Barsky in the Brigade, complained of Dr. Pike's *own* controlling nature. In a later letter to Head Nurse Fredericka Martin, he recalled an instance regarding "...Dr. Pike who descended on me and demanded *all* my blankets... So Pike who was a teniente took all the blankets and I had to use straw ticks for blankets in that bitter cold weather and no heat of any kind."⁶⁸ According to Byrne, Dr. Pike pulled rank just as much as his colleague Dr. Barsky.

American Medical Bureau literature claimed that hospitals ran amazingly smoothly, but the reality of the hospital was quite different. Intrapersonal bickering aside, problems arose over the distribution of the most undesirable jobs within the Brigade. At Villa Paz, Fredericka Martin became upset because: "Conflict arises over the responsibility of burning the dead. Frozen bodies stacked like cordwood."⁶⁹ Most members of the medical staff had never worked with dead bodies before their mission to Spain, so such tasks were difficult, even for commanding Nurse Martin, to assign.

In her unpublished diary, Mary Louise Platkin Torrence was shocked at some of the attitudes of doctors in the Brigade:

There was entirely too much petty riot going on between the various groups giving me the impression that each man was seeking glory, glory and more glory... I was completely disgusted and hurt, [but] quickly I decided that the best thing to do was to curb my tongue and just take things whether I liked it or not.⁷⁰

Though doctors claimed their reasons for joining the Brigade were: to help the impoverished people of Spain, stop fascism, or spread democracy, a layer of

self-promotion permeated their noble intentions. Legends of famous doctors in the previous World War left the romantic appeal of the doctor-in-shining-armor.

When activities at the American hospitals idled, rumors flew among the easily agitated nurses. Mildred Rackley remembered a time when “Rather few patients were coming in, so the girls had a chance to get their breaths and think about the discomforts of life.” With the appearance of Spanish soldier Arturo Corona, he “...went around telling wild stories that the Americans had been wiped out and that there were only nine left, and that he was the commanding officer. The place was alive with rumors.”⁷¹

Intrapersonal problems arose a few months later, in December of 1937, when Mildred Rackley mentioned her exasperation in dealing with jumpy, idle doctors and nurses:

They fret because they don't know what is happening at the front, because they don't know when the order will come to move the hospital to another front, because they don't get mail or packages from home, because one gets a leave and another doesn't, because somebody has got more stripes than somebody else, because the cook is dynamite and the food is bad, or because of almost anything.⁷²

Such worries, which did not pertain directly to medical duty, served as a distraction for the constant fear of *tomorrow*. Instead of worrying about the epidemic of dysentery that was killing most of their patients, or the location of the Nationalists' next bomb target, it was easier to think about bad sanitation and tasteless food.

To make matters worse, personal jealousies often ran through the members of the Medical Brigade. Rackley commented that whenever there was a lull in patients at the hospital, havoc broke loose:

There was arguing every night during and after supper about ranks and pay, fascists shooting people at night, strange lights left on hillsides to show enemy planes where we were located...Freddie [Fredericka Martin] was sore because she didn't have a rank, especially when Rose [Freed] and I had.⁷³

The Popular Front publications would have their readers believe that the American hospitals were small utopias sans class distinction, but this was just an ideal. Adding real people with hopes and desires into the mix caused various problems that the Communist Party failed to report.

Flighty bickering to pass the time was not the only type of animosity that arose on the Spanish hospital front. Dr. John Posner, a highly respected oral surgeon from New York and the leader of the third medical transport to Spain in March of 1937, was universally disliked by practically all his colleagues. Dr. Posner's own correspondence with the publication *Dental Outlook* portrayed him as an amiable surgeon, committed to the cause and highly respectful of his medical superiors. He is even found complimenting Dr. Pitts, the head of his medical outfit (upon the departure of Barsky for a speaking tour in the U.S.). "He has proven himself a master workman, a real organizer, and has the confidence and respect of one hundred percent of the personnel."⁷⁴

Dr. Posner had a high opinion of himself, but dentist Jack Klein, who had known Posner before his tenure in the Spanish brigades, predicted that working with him would prove difficult. “Of course I was appalled in America when I heard of Dr. Posner’s appointment to go to Spain. I knew him for the opportunist he was some time before Spain was in our consciousness. And as soon as I arrived at Villa Paz—the same hour—the battle was on.”⁷⁵

Nurse Frances Patai confirmed Posner’s difficult character in a letter home. “So much publicity about sending a surgeon to restore shattered jaws had given this ambitious man an inflated idea about his place in AMB’s [American Medical Brigade’s] setup. His demands for services and materials were impossible to fulfill. At the slightest delay he threatened to go home.”⁷⁶

An inflated ego was not the only fundamental problem with John Posner’s difficult character. He also directly contradicted the ideals of the International Brigades, demanding a separate mess for Americans and Spaniards. Fredericka Martin became exasperated with his demands and noted, “Controversy, initiated by Dr. Posner, regarding a separate mess for Americans—not just officers. American egalitarianism ran contrary to I.B. and Spanish army policy of divisions between officers at that time, but Posner was not satisfied by idea of officers messes. He wanted an all American one.”⁷⁷

His complaints caused such a rift among the Brigade members that Martin sent out an anonymous questionnaire, asking whether or not doctors and

nurses should be allowed to sit at the same seats as their patients. Two medics answered affirmatively. The first complained of not being able to communicate with the Spanish patients, and the second mentioned that it was in the best interest of accommodating the patients to keep them separate and comfortable.

On the other hand, negative responses proved to be much more vehement.

One member of the medical staff wrote:

No... If one is not desirous of having friendly relationships with the people who have risked their lives and are being patched up, to do the same again, to prevent Fascism not only getting a new foothold in Spain but also spreading to our own respective countries, they can at least make use of an opportunity to improve ones fluency in Spanish.

To medical personnel, separate seating arrangements contrasted directly with the international ideals that both the Lincoln Brigade and the Medical Brigade were trying to promote.

Another response wrote: "No. I prefer to eat with compatible patients rather than with incompatible doctors or nurses." The last felt it was "Unnecessary, uncomradely, unfriendly. Because to have one is to be snobbish, to make for class distinction."⁷⁸ Over all, medical staff stayed true to their Communist beliefs, and shunned all forms of class segregation. They defeated the proposition for separate dinner tables, and medical staff remained mixed with their patients, therefore promoting an open internationally accepting atmosphere rather than instilling social hierarchy.

Nevertheless, Dr. Posner's objections caused a rift in the hospital community. His unforgiving attitude also ebbed into the realm of his dental surgery. Fredericka Martin recalled that he was impossible toward his fellow dentists, comparing him to the diligence of his comrade Dr. Ettleson. "As no one could manufacture shattered jaws enough to satisfy Dr. Posner, no one could isolate or channel enough neurological cases to keep Dr. Ettleson and his staff busy."

Dr. Albert Byrne noted a similar dynamic between Posner and his co-workers. "At Villa Paz we had two dentists, Posner and Statts, but Posner's work was confined to surgery of the jaw—that is all he did in New York, and all Statts did was to follow him around."⁷⁹ Apparently he would not let Statts so much as touch another patient, lest he injure him or cause damage to Posner's over inflated ego.

Whether he was trying to romanticize his experience in Spain or he was speaking the truth, in an article to *Oral Hygiene* in 1942, Dr. Posner *did* mention an offense that was far more serious to the function of the Medical Brigade: treason. Making it sound like a whirlwind adventure, Posner described "The excitement, love, hate, sabotage, plotting, subversive political activity, and treason at the hospital... He whispered that Rudolfo, the administrator of the hospital had been arrested in Valencia, charged with being a spy."⁸⁰ Infiltration within the Brigade was commonplace, making trusting fellow staff members, whether American or Spanish, difficult.

The most sensationalized case of treason within the American Medical Brigade was that of Dr. Albert Byrne and Nurse Thelma Erickson. Byrne was a New York surgeon and the head of the second medical unit, which sailed for Spain in February of 1937. Seventeen months after he reached Spain, the couple fell in love and though it was highly discouraged within the Brigade, they decided to marry. In a letter home to her mother, Nurse Erickson wrote about Dr. Byrne: “Here is a picture of my Doctor. He is a wonderful man and I think both of you will like him as much as I do. He is quite serious and very very intelligent. There are not so many doctors who are as well informed on a large number of subjects.”⁸¹

Shortly after the letter, head surgeon Dr. Rintz was bedridden, placing Dr. Byrne, who was not known for his leadership qualities, in charge of the hospital at Albacete. Dr Rintz stated that Byrne “...operated on the cases he could—all too aware of his inadequacy... this explains his account of being alone and feeling so helpless.”⁸² His spirits began to deteriorate, along with his feelings of dedication toward the war, which by July of 1938 was looking like a lost cause.

Another surgeon at the hospital, Dr. Ettleson continued the account of Byrne’s behaviors, claiming that he married Thelma Erickson in July and decided to go directly to the front to prove his dedication to the cause. Upon hearing his plans, his wife forbade it, insisting he had tuberculosis. Both filed

for papers to return to America but the International Brigades denied their return. Dr Ettleson stated:

At the same time, Dr. Byrne, who had previously, in my presence, spoken with definite sympathy towards the Spanish Government's cause, began to speak in an openly unsympathetic manner and by degrees became unsympathetic, unfavorably disposed, antagonistic, hostile and finally, openly pro-fascist.

He was incarcerated directly. Dr. Ettleson visited him in jail with Dr. Goland and "It was evident that Dr. Byrne had great difficulty in restraining himself from attacking Dr. Goland but he made no such attempt. It was also obvious that his prison experience had done him a great deal of harm physically and mentally..."⁸³

The press had a field day with the news of Byrne's treasonous sentiments not to mention his seemingly scandalous marriage to Thelma Ettleson. The British *Daily Express* printed the sensational headline: "2-Day Bride Jailed In Spain." Though his wife Ettleson was never incarcerated, the story read: "Two days after that [their secret marriage] we were dragged off to jail. We think it was partly because 'Byrnie' criticized the administration, for letting men go to the front without soles to their boots, and partly because they had got to know we wanted to leave."⁸⁴

The *New York Times* also ran the story in a less scandalous manner, interested more in the truth of the matter than its sensational romantic quality. "According to the authorities here, Dr. Byrne was arrested because of his unwillingness to recognize that doctors, like soldiers, must consider

themselves militarized. There was no serious charge against him, nor was he ever suspected of disloyalty.” The greater issue was a disciplinary one—a breach with the strict rules of the Communist Party. According to the *Times*, he was further detained because an incriminating letter, attacking the head of military information, was found on him after his wife’s visit. “Dr. Byrne, who has been around Valencia for the past week, says he was always treated well in prison.”⁸⁵

Whether it was a romantic scandal that reached the pages of the *Times* or nurses playing practical jokes, the daily grind of medical life in Spain was one thing the Communist Party did not directly influence. Radical ideals about class structure flew out the window when one nurse was appointed head over the other. In the quieted testimonies of diaries and personal letters, the humanity of the members of the American Medical Brigade finally came out.

The much sensationalized story of the Medical Brigade told by the radical press conflicted directly with doctors’ personal wartime experiences. The American Left used the Medical Brigade as a rallying point for its cause, advertising the need for supplies and donations from the American people. Through this optimistic cover, doctors and nurses became exhausted, and especially toward the end of the war, when it was clear that their cause was lost, their morale plummeted. There was shell-shock, sickness, and suicide, but this was not the whole story. The true medical experience can be understood while scrolling through the personal diary of Mildred Rackley or

the field notes of Fredericka Martin, who towering over the rest of her staff at 5'9", was known as "Ma" for her maternal affections. As she scurried from operating room to bedside, she remarked "...I am too occupied to think much of my personal feelings. I often wonder if I shall ever be an individual again."⁸⁶ These do not speak of Communist propaganda or harrowing bombings, but of the day to day lives of ordinary people placed in an extraordinary circumstance.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER TWO

- ¹ Publication in the *New Masses* to raise support for medical aid to Spain. May 11, 1937.
- ² "Surgeon Goes to War: unpublished memoir of Dr. Edward Barsky" found in: Tamiment Library, New York University, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (henceforth referred to as ALBA), Edward Barsky Papers, Box 5, Folder 4.
- ³ Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks. *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*. (New York and London: 1996) 274.
- ⁴ Ibid. 234.
- ⁵ Commentary from Barney Malbrin, ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 1.
- ⁶ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 242.
- ⁷ Commentary by Celia Greenspan Seborer: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 31
- ⁸ Barney Malbrin: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 1.
- ⁹ American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. "From A Hospital in Spain" (New York: 1937) 11.
- ¹⁰ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 274.
- ¹¹ Ibid. 241.
- ¹² Ibid. 246.
- ¹³ Ibid. 271-272.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 249.
- ¹⁵ "From a Hospital in Spain" 1.
- ¹⁶ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 251.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. 249.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 251.
- ¹⁹ Commentary from Celia Greenspan Seborer: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 31.
- ²⁰ Ibid. Box 6, Folder 9.
- ²¹ John Posner. "A letter from Spain." *Dental Outlook*. 24, (1937) 471.
- ²² Unpublished memoir of Fredericka Martin: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 9.
- ²³ *Evening Journal* and *New York American*, July 19, 1937. Clippings found in: ALBA, Edward Barsky Papers, Box 4, Folder 14.
- ²⁴ "A Surgeon Goes to War." ALBA, Edward Barsky Papers, Box 5, Folder 9.
- ²⁵ American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. "One Year in Spain." (New York: 1938).
- ²⁶ Unpublished memoir of Fredericka Martin: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 9.
- ²⁷ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 7, Folder 6.
- ²⁸ Mary Louise Platkin Torrence's unpublished diary of the SCW: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.
- ²⁹ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 89
- ³⁰ "Proud Within Themselves" Manuscript by Fredericka Martin found in: ALBA, Fredericka

-
- Martin Papers, Box 10, folder 9.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 252.
- ³³ Ibid. 249.
- ³⁴ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 2.
- ³⁵ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 89.
- ³⁶ Ibid. 95.
- ³⁷ Ibid. 235.
- ³⁸ Unpublished memoir of Fredericka Martin found in: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 9.
- ³⁹ *New York Times*. Dec. 7, 1937. 16.
- ⁴⁰ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 5, Folder 20.
- ⁴¹ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 267
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid. 238.
- ⁴⁴ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 7, Folder 6.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., Box 5, Folder 29.
- ⁴⁶ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 90.
- ⁴⁷ "From a Hospital in Spain." 21.
- ⁴⁸ Unpublished memoir of Fredericka Martin found in: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 10.
- ⁴⁹ "A Surgeon Goes to War." ALBA, Edward Barsky Papers, Box 5, Folder 4.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 9, Folder 26.
- ⁵² ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 2.
- ⁵³ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 91.
- ⁵⁴ Fredericka Martin's interview with Ida Lipschitz in 1977: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 9, Folder 12.
- ⁵⁵ Edward Barsky. "A Surgeon Goes to War" 79.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid. 81.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid. 85.
- ⁵⁸ Commentary by ambulance driver Carl Rahman: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 16; Dr. Richard Chodoff: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 7, Folder 6.
- ⁵⁹ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 251.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid. 259.
- ⁶¹ Ibid. 259.
- ⁶² Letter from Dr Julius Hene, Aug. 15, 1937. ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 9, Folder 10.
- ⁶³ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 256.
- ⁶⁴ Mildred Rackley's Spanish Civil War memoir: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 14.
- ⁶⁵ Comments on Cordoba: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 5, Folder 17; Unhelpful nurses in Tarazon: Mildred Rackley's SCW memoirs, ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 14.
- ⁶⁶ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, folder 3.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid. Box 11, folder 2
- ⁶⁸ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 2.
- ⁶⁹ Unpublished memoir of F. Martin: Ibid. Box 10, folder 9.
- ⁷⁰ Mary Louise Platkin Torrence's unpublished diary of the SCW: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.
- ⁷¹ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 14.
- ⁷² ALBA, Mildred Rackley Simon Papers, Box 1, folder 11.

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- ⁷³ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 14.
- ⁷⁴ John Posner. "A letter from Spain." *Dental Outlook*. 24, (1937) 471.
- ⁷⁵ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 9, Folder 38.
- ⁷⁶ ALBA, Frances Patai Papers, Box 5, Folder 14.
- ⁷⁷ Unpublished memoir of F. Martin: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 9.
- ⁷⁸ Answers to survey conducted by F. Martin: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 14.
- ⁷⁹ Letter from Albert Byrne to Fredericka Martin, ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 10, Folder 14.
- ⁸⁰ "Oral surgeon in the Spanish War." *Oral Hygiene*, 32 (June 1942) 777.
- ⁸¹ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 7, Folder 18.
- ⁸² Information on Dr. Byrne's case: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 5, Folder 17.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Daily Express, July 12, 1938. Clipping found in: ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 5, Folder 17.
- ⁸⁵ *New York Times*, July 6, 1938.14.
- ⁸⁶ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 259.

CHAPTER THREE THE JOURNEY HOME

“In the name of humanity—send something now!”¹
-Advertisement for aid to Spain, 1937

On July 19, 1937 a crowd of 22,000 gathered in New York’s Madison Square Garden to mark the first anniversary of fighting in Spain. Ignoring the stifling summer heat, the Loyalist supporters listened and cheered to a handful of well picked speakers, meant to reach out to every member of the audience. The Popular Front organized rally was meant to raise supplies and other support for Spain but in truth it had another goal: to lift the American embargo on Spain.

The cheers died down when Dr. Edward Barsky, who had returned to the United States for a whirlwind tour to raise support for Spain, took the podium. He spoke optimistically of his time in Spain where he had set up six hospitals within six months. He cited the bravery of the ninety nine members of the American Medical Brigade and boasted of their twenty-four ambulances, and their sixty tons of equipment. “Let me urge every surgeon, physician, and nurse, all who are for peace and democracy and against fascism to come to Spain and take part in this great struggle.”² He also cited the need for supplies and donations, never once mentioning the horrors doctors and nurses were

suffering on the Iberian Peninsula. This was a day for optimism, a day to influence public opinion in favor of Spain, a day to urge Roosevelt to act.

When the crowd erupted into cheers, Communist Party leader Earl Browder stepped up to the platform which was draped with the vibrant colors of Spain. In front of an enormous portrait of General José Miaja, leader of the Loyalist Madrid armies, Browder spoke of the “shameful embargo.” He called it “a disgrace that can be wiped out only by complete reversal of this treacherous policy.”

Representing the solidarity of the Popular Front, the chairman of the Socialist Party, Norman Thomas took the podium to attack Great Britain. “If one year ago Britain had stood firm for the accepted right of governments to get supplies in time of rebellion, this war would have been over long ago.” Other speakers included United States House Representative Jerry O’Connell, African American Communist Angelo Herndon, and former Reichstag Deputy Maria Halberstadt.

The Popular Front never showed more solidarity in featuring speakers to appeal to all parties, races and genders. So many people showed up to the meeting that overflow meetings filled the streets outside. The *New York Times* complained that “a detail of seventy-five policemen and twenty-five mounted policemen was insufficient to control the crowd...”³ In this moment, the leftist population of New York felt the influence of the Spanish Civil War at its strongest.

The Spanish cause, and more specifically the Medical Brigade in Spain provided a direct link between the Spanish Civil War and the Popular Front of the United States. Doctors and nurses flooded the media with correspondence and diaries, giving the public a view of the “real Spanish experience.” Campaigns with the specific goal of raising funds for medical supplies or sending an ambulance to Spain became the fashion among intellectual institutions across the country. Until the imminent end of the war in 1939, the Medical Bureau held raucous rallies in Madison Square Garden and inundated Roosevelt with telegrams urging him to end the embargo. Despite their hearty attempts, these rallies did little to change the larger public opinion, and it became clear that the troops and medical personnel, who had been patiently waiting for the United States to act, were in the fight alone.

Nevertheless, anyone who considered him or herself progressive at all during the late 1930s had something sympathetic to say about the lot of the Spaniards. In May of 1937, at the height of the Spanish aid fervor, the Medical Bureau advertised the “Benefit Spain Dance.” The event’s advertisement took up half the page in the radical magazine, the *New Masses*, and featured a sketch of a pretty nurse in its corner. “Stars of Stage, Screen, and Radio” were listed as the night’s entertainment including Henny Youngman, Benny Goodman, Eddie Duchin, Estelle Taylor, and Jules Garfield and Katherine Locke, who would perform a scene from “Having a Wonderful Time.”⁴

In the spring of 1938, invitations went out in New York society for a charity ball, sponsored by the Spanish Society Relief Committee for the benefit of the “SPANISH ORPHANS,” capitalized as if to emphasize their plight. The proceeds of the party were donated to medical relief and “the suffering children in war-torn Spain.”⁵ Several weeks later a similar event occurred, called the “Benefit Spring Dance— Baile De Las Flores.” Such events pulled the Spanish cause to the center of the New York social scene.

Large universities donated huge sums of money, proving their support for the Medical Brigade. For example, a Medical Bureau pamphlet, published in late 1938, sported a large photograph of doctors and nurses gathered around a beat up ambulance with the name HARVARD scrawled across its trunk. Alongside, its caption read, “Students at Harvard University decided to send an ambulance to Spain. In a brief ten-day campaign not only enough funds were raised to purchase the ambulance, fully equipped but also additional funds for medical supplies.”⁶ Yale responded by sending its own ambulance to Spain. The battlefields quickly began to look like Ivy League campaign trails. Sending an ambulance to Spain was the chic, humanitarian thing to do.

Sandor Voros, a medical official was interviewing frontline hospital staff when he saw an ambulance from Cleveland, his hometown. “Saw small Cleveland ambulance. It’s liked very much because it’s small and can approach front line very closely.”⁷ In this light, ambulances and supply trucks were not only useful for medical staff, but they served to raise morale within

the troops. Voros felt slightly stronger, knowing that his kinsmen had sent their support for a cause he was ready to die for.

Letters home from doctors and nurses also filtered into Medical Bureau publicity and propaganda. Dr. Barsky's secretary, Mildred Rackley wrote directly to the Medical Bureau, asking for troops and supplies. She complained of "the pressing need for able surgeons in all fields." Later she gave a complete medical list of supplies the hospital was lacking:

We hope that the unit which has sailed is another complete surgical unit with supplies to set up another emergency hospital. This should include everything— X-ray, complete electricity (portable) generator, wire splints of all kinds, complete list of instruments for brain operations, electro-magnet for removal of foreign bodies, all sorts of surgical needles, needles for local anesthesia, suture material... There are practically no supplies here.⁸

Other letters were not sent directly to the Medical Bureau but nevertheless, Communist and Popular Front organizations still used them for propaganda. Dr. Barsky wrote a long letter to a fellow doctor, describing the harrowing conditions on the fields, the progresses the medical staff was making, and the righteousness of his cause. At the end he attached a simple note that determined the letter's true purpose. "Hope you can use some of the above notes for publicity—save them for me."⁹

Dr. Leo Eloesser, who joined the Medical Brigade from San Francisco, wrote similar letters. To a friend he wrote, "...as I am doing now, writing you a detailed account of our work at the Tereul front, accompanying it with a few furbelows which I thought you might use for campaign purposes." Later he

wrote to the same friend, explaining his doings in the Brigade and asking him to keep the public aware of their cause.

I've sent a sort of diary of my adventures and doings back to San Francisco, which will be sent to the Medburo there. You might send a copy of this letter there and ask them to forward the other to you. By parching them together you should have quite enough, more than enough, publicity material.¹⁰

In this highly controversial and public war, letters were not intimate correspondence but methods of proving the legitimacy of the Loyalist cause and raising public support.

The American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy itself published a compilation of nurses' letters from the war. Entitling the pamphlet, "From a Hospital in Spain," the Medical Bureau set out to sketch the conditions and reasons for these women's stay in Spain. Letters that were passed off as candid accounts of the American medical experience in Spain, were written directly *for* such publications. They were supposed to arouse the sympathies of possible benefactors, telling of bloody fascist bombings and nurses performing heroic deeds. The headline simply stated, "We urge you to read them—and act."¹¹

To keep the Spanish struggle centered on the tortured people of Spain, the Medical Brigade also filtered translated versions of Spanish publications to the American public. A pamphlet issued by a weekly Spanish news service by the Madrid front in 1938 read: "Juana Martinez is not a soldier. Juana Martinez never wore a uniform—never carried a gun. Nevertheless, she lies in

a ward of the American Hospital here today, an 18-year-old widow and mother of a prematurely born baby girl. She is a victim of the fascist invasion.”¹² The Medical Bureau used victims in American hospitals to capitalize on the sentiments of the American public, hoping to rally enough support in their favor.

Along with the Medical Bureau, leftist newspapers used the Spanish war and its participants on large front page headlines. For example, the *New Masses*, an American magazine known for its leftist opinions and sympathy to Marxist doctrine, featured the “Spanish Diary” of ambulance driver James Neugass. Ambulance drivers being some of the few medical staff privy to battle scenes, the account provided enough action to hold the attention of the American reader and properly villainize Franco’s Nationalists. Neugass spoke of the oppositions’ harrowing bombings meant to do nothing more than destroy the psychological morale of the soldiers. “Their (Nationalists’) artillery had been throwing incendiary shells against our hillside for the same pseudo-psychological purposes, since the only inflammable things on these desert hillsides are low thorn-bushes.”

After establishing the enemy as heartless bombers, Neugass indirectly commented on the lack of Loyalist supplies. “I am worried (1) that the fascists will come through the pass, cut the road and bottle us up in the town with all our equipment and ambulances; (2) that the boys up on the hill are taking a lot of punishment.”¹³ His interest in the ambulances and supplies were his first

priority, only afterward did he consider human lives. Such statements pleaded with the American people to send more supplies, suggesting that the hills of Spain were overflowing with willing soldiers and all that was needed were the ambulances to care for the wounded.

Other publications were less subtle and called for immediate support for the American Medical Brigade. The Dental Division of the American Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy sent out bold statements, encouraging support for Spain and making the conflict seem relevant to the safety and freedoms of Americans. First the pamphlet claimed, “Spain’s fate may be ours—Fight fascism in Spain by urging the government to scrap the Neutrality Act. Send a telegram today.” After giving a concrete action for the ordinary citizen to carry out, the orders continued.” Do not permit newspaper propaganda to influence you—rather say: ‘Don’t give up ship!’” And last, the Bureau asked for aid, the least an ordinary American could do to help. “It is wise to remember, Spain is giving the Life of its Nation to stop Fascism— You are only asked, so far, for financial support for the care of its wounded.”¹⁴ The Popular Front, and more specifically, the Communist Party, filtered such advertisements directly to the American public.

In fact, the Party used the Medical Brigade for more than just a rallying point. Along with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, American doctors and nurses were plastered across the front pages of the *Daily Worker* almost as soon as they left for Spain. In many issues from January of 1937 onward, next to an

application to join the Communist Party, the *Worker* featured a petition for donation to the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy.

In June of 1938, to gain sympathy toward the war effort, the front page of the *Worker* showed a picture of Nurse Helen Freeman lying prostrate on a hospital bed. The only thing larger than the bandage on her arm was the broad smile across her face. Underneath the photograph, the caption read, “Helen Freeman is the only American nurse wounded in Spain. She will be one of the honored returned Americans who will sit on the platform at the Madison Square Garden Spain rally tonight.”¹⁵ This message served not only to raise awareness for the perilous Spanish war, but it appealed directly to the sympathies of leftist Americans. The message rang loud and clear: Helen Freeman nearly lost her arm for Spain. Why aren’t you helping?

Leftist papers and publications reached out to a broad audience, including special appeals to women and blacks in their sweep for support. The Negro Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, a Communist front organization centered in Harlem, used Nurse Salaria Kee as their link to the Spanish battlefields. The pamphlet, “A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain” profiled Kee’s exploits in the American hospitals, explaining her valued bravery and ingenuity, while she worked alongside white nurses and doctors. In a plea for American action, the pamphlet described the devastating state of the Spanish villages. “They came to the Hospital Americano for help. Infants a month old, blind children, children covered with ulcers—usually the result of no medical

care or health education. (The Loyalists are fighting for education and social service.)”

True to its intent, while listing Kee’s patients and invoking pity from American citizens, the publication managed to slip in the mantra of the Loyalist regime (and consequently that of the Communist Party). In a plea for money and supplies, the pamphlet spoke of Kee’s return to the United States. “It is difficult, she says to see so much goods everywhere and to recall how many times a patient’s life was lost from infection just because there was no surgical dressing or the simplest of antiseptics.”¹⁶ The statement went further than simply asking for money from Americans, but it placed a guilt trip on their consciences. At home Americans sat in two story houses eating Corn Flakes while the Spaniards died on tables because there was not enough antiseptic to clean their wounds.

Popular Front newspapers and publications were not the only press that covered the American Medical Brigade with sympathy. When asked how he became aware of the Spanish war effort, ambulance driver Carl Rahman wrote: “My information about Spain was gained from reading Herbert Matthews in the *New York Times*.”¹⁷ Matthews spent nearly three years traveling with the Loyalist Spanish troops, sending stories of their affairs back to America. Naturally, his sympathies tended toward his company and thus, the *Times* often printed stories that portrayed the valiant American soldier or the heroic front line doctor. Matthews’ stories were not directly

propagandistic as were those of the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*, but simply in covering the American effort in the war, they raised significant awareness for its cause.

In fact, over the course of the war Matthews became one of the Loyalists' main supporters and advertisers. He was particularly concerned with correcting the popular opinion that the Loyalist forces had slaughtered priests and burned Spanish churches. In the manuscript for his later novel *Half of Spain Died*, he wrote:

Pope Pius XI openly sympathized with the Nationalists and a majority of the American hierarchy's belief that the Loyalists were out to destroy the Church in Spain. The killing of priests, monks, and nuns and the burning of churches in the first mad, uncontrollable weeks of the rebellion reinforced these fears. An indelible stamp of anti-religion and anti-clericalism was put upon the Republicans from the earliest days.¹⁸

Nearly thirty years later, in his memoir, *A World in Revolution*, Matthews claimed "the Spanish Civil War of 1939-1939 was a political conversion for me." Matthews followed the Loyalist armies from their start in Madrid through their retreat to Catalonia in 1939 and witnessed their heroism, hardship, and eventual decimation. He insisted on the Spanish Civil War's importance on a grand scale because it involved so many separate countries. "The Spanish Civil War directly involved Spain, Portugal, Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union. Indirectly Britain, France and the United States were caught up in the struggle."¹⁹ The war was truly an international conflict, but in the mid 1930s (and still today) much of the public regarded it as a far away

battle in an unimportant European country—and by some conservatives, a Communist scheme to control American politics.

Following the lead of the *New York Times*, the rest of the mainstream press began to cover the Spanish war effort, and more specifically the Medical Brigade. In January of 1938, the *San Francisco Chronicle* featured an article positively announcing two nurses' imminent journey to Spain's aid. "Miss Evelyn Andell, Sausalito, and Miss Alice Elizabeth Wagoon and Thomas Hayes, both of San Francisco, will sail from New York, January 22 on a mission of mercy to war-ridden Spain."²⁰ The mainstream San Francisco paper illustrated the medical trio in a favorable light, headed on a quest of humanitarianism. As in the case with the *Times*, simply printing the article showed the paper's support and got the word out to the American people.

Dr. Leo Eloesser, also of San Francisco, showed up in an article of the *San Francisco Examiner*. The article quoted his speech to a San Francisco club about his time as a doctor in Spain and his short position as head of the hospital at Villa Paz. "The Red Cross insignia over a building is a joke... The bombing of a hospital demoralizes the soldiers tremendously, and the bombers know it. In the same way, bombing women and children demoralizes the civilian forces."²¹ Especially before the Neutrality act of 1937, the mainstream press treated the Spanish cause with sympathy. The press viewed American doctors along with soldiers as heroic men and women, offering their lives for their beliefs.

The Medical Brigade also gained exposure through literature, both during the Spanish Civil War and in its aftermath. The most famous literary figure to raise awareness for the Spanish conflict was journalist and novelist Ernest Hemingway. He was a war correspondent at the time of the Spanish conflict and reminiscent of his days with the American Field Service of World War I, he even joined the Brigade for a very short time as an ambulance driver. This was common for literary figures, as it gave them an outlet for their political consciences without putting their lives at high risk.

In spite of his high profile, or perhaps because of it, Hemingway tended to be universally disliked among the members of the Brigade. Dr. John Simon said he was typically the subject of animosity because of his higher-than-thou attitude. “Ernest Hemingway was around the other day, looked about our first-aid station, and announced when departing, ‘I suppose everyone has lice.’”²² Medical staff complained that his celebrity status gave him little or no respect for his superiors.

Hemingway’s friend and confidante, Herbert Matthews had a different opinion of the Brigade’s unfavorable attitude toward his fellow journalist. He said “Because Hemmingway depicted André Marry, the French Communist commander of the International Brigades, as the sadistic, twisted fanatic that he was, and had a vivid chapter on Loyalist atrocities [in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*], the American Communist Party turned on him and vilified him.”²³

The Communist Party was unwilling to tarnish the International Brigades' heroic image even at the hand of the famous journalist.

Nevertheless, by way of the Medical Brigade, Hemingway created a large amount of exposure for the Spanish cause. While in Spain he worked as a correspondent for the *New York Times*, adding to the brigade's coverage with credible and mainstream sources. In an effort to help the medical cause, he bought two ambulances with his own money and raised funds for other medical supplies. Also, though it depicted a romanticized version of the war, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, served as literary exposure for the entire Spanish Civil War effort.

Hemingway was not the only literary figure who became highly involved in the Spanish Conflict. Martha Gelhorn, a respected journalist from New York (who would later marry Hemingway) also spent a significant time in Madrid covering the Spanish conflict. She published for mainstream ladies magazines, typically *Collier's* with a slant that was extremely in favor of the Loyalists.

In July of 1937, in her article, "Only the Shells Whine," Gelhorn described the terror of living in bomb infested Madrid, painting a picture of the heroic population of the city. While she stood on a street corner during a mass of shelling she recalled, "A little Spaniard said to me, 'You don't like it?'" When she replied negatively he merely shrugged and said, "It is nothing. It will pass. In any case, you can only die once."²⁴ The picture of heroism in a Spanish

child sent home to a mainstream magazine appealed directly to the sympathies of American readers, who could discuss the horrors of Spain as they raised money at dances and rallies.

Josephine Herbst, another American reporter based in New York, joined Gelhorn and wrote similar articles for *The New York Post*. Reminiscing on her Spanish experiences twenty years later in her essay “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain,” she revealed different feelings about her Spanish experience. “What was wanted was black or white” regarding Spain’s conflict. Unable to give a definitive stance, she only remembered that “...the heavy shelling sounded oddly unconvincing; curiously like one of those torrential thunderstorms we used to get in the Iowa of my childhood.” Unlike many journalists she remembered Spain’s outright horror, not its tales of heroism or grandeur. “I can hardly think back upon Spain now without a shiver of awe; it is like remembering how it was to be in an earthquake where the ground splits to caverns, mountains rise in what was a plain.”²⁵ Herbst’s feelings looking back toward Spain showed the tension between the writers’ pressure to send optimistic tales of bravery home to America and their personal dealings with firsthand war trauma.

Nevertheless, most correspondence sent to the home front from Spain was highly optimistic. Journalist Dorothy Parker joined Herbst and Gelhorn in Madrid, providing correspondence to American journals and magazines. Parker noted the “terrible resignation on the faces of women and the faces of

children wild with terror.” Like the others, her depiction was meant to appeal to the American public, forcing them to act.

Gellhorn’s approach was more direct. In a correspondence with her friend Eleanor Roosevelt she pleaded for the lifting of the American arms embargo. “The young men will die; the best ones will die first. And the old powerful men will survive to mishandle the peace. Why don’t we lift our embargo to Spain?”²⁶

Furthermore, leading intellectual figures that did not join the ranks or sail across the Atlantic to Spain’s aid vocally supported the Loyalist cause. In the publication *Authors Take Sides*, author Frederick Benson asked current literary figures if they were for or against the legal government of the People’s Republic of Spain. Their answers were highly in favor of the Loyalists.

C. Day Lewis commented: “I look upon it quite simply as a battle between light and darkness.” He felt nothing more needed to be said. Other authors such as Jack Lindsay had more to say on the matter. He stated: “I believe this is an epic conflict in which ideas like Freedom and Culture leap out with a new tremendous urgency...to be above the battle, when such a cause is concerned, is to be sub-human.”

William Faulkner made his stance known clearly with the statement, “I most sincerely wish to go on record as being unalterably opposed to Franco and Fascism, to all violations of the legal government and outrages against the people of Republican Spain.” John Steinbeck, who was known for his socially

conscious writings such as the *Grapes of Wrath*, took the question as an insult. He steadfastly replied “I believe in the despotism of human life and happiness against the liberty of money and possessions.”

The firm stance of prominent literary minds of the day outlined another aspect of the Popular Front in the 1930s. They felt fascism threatened their creativity and rights of personal expression. “They were therefore simultaneously idealists, looking for a better world, and realists, who well understood their enemies”. Depression era intellectuals were able to affirm their identity with the masses by either going to Spain and fighting alongside them or avidly supporting their cause on the home front.²⁷

The only people who were able to persuade public opinion better than literary figures were the veterans of the American Medical Brigade themselves. The Loyalist government did not officially disband the International Brigades until December of 1938, but many doctors, nurses, and soldiers returned home early due to personal problems, injury, or simple exhaustion. These members took to campaigning across the country, giving speeches to raise both money and awareness for Spain.

Even while they were still in Spain, medical staff kept tabs on newly returned members and passed ideas through to the Medical Bureau. Rose Freed, who was head nurse for a short time at Tereul, wrote home to enquire about her former colleague Dr. Beller. “I was very glad to hear that Dr. Beller is doing such good work for Spain. The money you collected could best be

used in buying a small generator.”²⁸ Contact between frontline medical workers and campaigners helped keep spirits high both in the Spanish hospitals *and* on the home front, adding to the cohesive spirit of the Spanish Civil War.

However, not all returned doctors and nurses were model speakers. Some refused to participate in the campaign effort, and others, like Donald Pitts, were asked not to come back at all. In a Medical Bureau correspondence, director Mary Gordon wrote negatively about Pitts’ speaking skills. : “I am enclosing copy of Dr. Pitts’ speech delivered at our meeting in Rockford, Ill. On Sept. 9th. We suggest that when you read it you put on a pair of sunglasses. To me it seems a waste of time and money to send a speaker like Pitts out on tour. His delivery is very cold and uninteresting and he seems unable to answer questions correctly.”²⁹ In some cases, simply being politically passionate was not enough to woo crowds to sympathize with the war.

The veterans of the Medical Brigade campaigned furiously across the United States, gathering funds for hospitals and sending masses of telegrams to President Roosevelt to lift the embargo. Their earnest efforts were to no avail. In late May of 1938, the battle of Ebro marked the beginning of the end for the Spanish Loyalists.

Though not all were stationed near the front, the Medical Brigade was far from immune to the successive Loyalist defeats. After constant bombings at Tereul, Villa Paz and Albacete (the locations of the major American

hospitals), there were few ambulances left, and the Loyalist government had all medical staff evacuated to Catalonia. The Loyalist government put Dr. Edward Barsky in command of all International hospitals in Spain, and gave him exactly ninety six hours to evacuate *all* patients and personnel from Central Spain. Under tremendous pressure, Barsky did very well, but he remarked remorsefully, “Contrary to some data on the subject, the *last* train didn’t make it. It was heavily bombed and held up on the Valencia side with American and other International wounded.”

Once in Catalonia, Dr. Barsky, joined by his medical colleague Dr. Leo Eloesser and his secretary from the first medical mission, Mildred Rackley, worked sending patients back to their respective countries. This entailed submitting a list of those to be evacuated to the French government with a request for transit permits. He successfully evacuated his first list of five hundred men through France, but Rebel bombers foiled his second attempt.

He was about to evacuate this hospital train when at the last moment, a member of the Loyalist government decided to give an impassioned speech to the brave wounded returning home. Fascist spies tipped off their forces, and they caught the hospital train in a tunnel between Port Bou and France. The Rebels bombed both entrances mercilessly, trapping the train for nearly an entire day. After this incident, the French government refused to accept further wounded soldiers, and Barsky smuggled the wounded one by one across the border to safety.³⁰

All these factors grated on both Dr. Barsky and his remaining medical staff. As they moved into June of 1938, casualties became heavier at the hospital and there was a general fear among men that Catalonia would soon be overrun by the enemy. Though he suffered from exhaustion and became severely pessimistic, Barsky refused to leave Spain. When Hemingway (who was Barsky's friend) suggested "Look! Why the hell let our guys get trapped by the Fascists? If it has to be done, I'll get an American warship and we'll evacuate every single American." Shocked at the suggestion, Barsky remained steadfast to the cause he had signed up for nearly sixteen months prior. "Fine! I'll go along with that—as soon as the Spanish government tells us the war's over and we're no longer needed."³¹

The International Brigades never saw the fateful end of the war against fascism. On September 21, 1938, Juan Negrin Lopez, the last Prime Minister of the Spanish Republic, announced the withdrawal of the International Brigades to the League of Nations. "In her desire to contribute to the pacification and 'restraint' which we all desire, and in order to eliminate all pretexts and possible doubts about the genuinely national character of the cause for which the republican Army is fighting, the Spanish Government has decided to withdraw immediately and completely all the non-Spanish combatants who are participating in the fight in Spain on the side of the Government..."³² With his withdrawal of all foreign troops, Negrin meant to establish Spain's fight as purely national, free of political influences. Not to

mention the fact that he wanted to encourage Germany and Italy to withdraw from the fight as well, but they failed to comply.

With their sudden withdrawal, a sense of abandonment pervaded both the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Medical Brigade. Wounded soldier Milton Wolfe recalled, “I never felt right about leaving, walking out of it. I had signed up for the end, and I wasn’t prepared, psychologically, to leave.”³³ Though they were under tremendous psychological pressure, and many secretly yearned for their comfortable home practices, leaving before there was a clear defeat or victory felt like abandonment.

Feelings of guilt were common among both the men and women. In her personal diary, Nurse Mary Louise Platkin Torrance remembered feeling helpless when she was forced to leave the Spanish people. “Isn’t it an awful feeling coming into France such a short distance away and being able to have all the food, comforts one wants? I still eat everything with a guilty feeling—wishing loads of foodstuffs and supplies could be sent to Spain.”³⁴

Nevertheless, the International Brigades did not leave without the gratitude of the Spanish Republic. In October of 1938, the National Committee of the People’s Front of Spain issued a final decree to its international volunteers. “We bid farewell with infinite gratitude and with a profound feeling of fraternity. The citizens of our country will forever retain the memory of their prodigious heroism and self-sacrifice that nothing can erase from their hearts.”³⁵ Two major groups of American volunteers, including Medical

Brigade members, crossed into France on December 2nd and 12th of 1938. The fight was over, but as one volunteer ominously stated, “We but left one battlefield for another.”

The return of the Lincoln Brigade and the Medical Brigade created a frenzy of publications from the press, urging President Roosevelt to lift the embargo as the Spanish Republic’s last chance. In early 1939, the press pushed even harder for support. The *New York Times* published a statement by Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson that read:

If the Loyalist Government is overthrown, it is evident now that its defeat will be solely due to the fact that it has been deprived of its right to buy from us and other friendly nations the munitions necessary for its defense... In short, I have come to the conclusion that the embargo imposed under the resolution of May 1, 1937, should be at once lifted by the President. By its terms I believe he has the power to take such action.³⁶

In turn, the *New York Herald Tribune* published an article by reporter Dorothy Thompson, scorning the American public for not taking more action.

We are simply, like all the rest of the democratic world, yielding to blackmail, and like France, following the lead of a British government which has proved an appalling incapacity of courage, leadership, or even simple morality. And the Neutrality Act, presumably designed to keep peace, is being used to assist one of the most ruthless and cynical interventions in history.³⁷

But these were the last cries for the embargo’s end, a final yet futile push for Spanish support. In truth, Loyalist Spain had little chance against Franco’s trained military supported by the fire power of Hitler and Mussolini.

When Madrid finally fell to Nationalist forces in March of 1939 a wave of anguish swept through veterans of the Lincoln Brigade and the American

Medical Brigade. Former nurse Ruth Davidow and ambulance driver Evelyn Hutchins had launched a whirlwind tour of the American south in a bullet riddled ambulance from Spain; Ruth still sported her Medical Brigade patch as they spoke to audiences from Washington D.C., to Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Texas. They were entering Tampa to speak at a pro- Loyalist church when they heard the news. Franco had entered Madrid. Even fifty years after the fact Davidow recalled “I cried my eyes out...I don’t want to remember. Because when I think back to it, I am still quite crushed.”³⁸

Former nurse Dorothy Fontaine remembered, “I was on tour when Madrid fell, and I was called home. I was heartbroken. The Republic never had a chance.” Similarly, years later, former Head Nurse Fredericka Martin showed reluctance to call the Republican defeat a loss. “I felt it was a pause in the battle.” For many, the success of Franco represented a bitter omen to the future of fascism. They could see the beginnings of a world war, one that might have been prevented had the United States taken the side of democracy in Spain”³⁹

After the Spanish Civil War’s end, a new war emerged, dominating the scene of the American front. World War II made many citizens look back on the Spanish conflict as the opening battle between fascism and democracy. Hollywood continued to immortalize the fight with the production of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943) and one of the most critically acclaimed Hollywood movies of all time, *Casablanca* (1943). The adaptation of

Hemingway's novel for the screen, featuring Ingrid Bergman and Gary Cooper, portrayed the young American Robert Jordan's adventures between good and evil on the Spanish battlefield. *Casablanca* contained a subtler reference. Humphrey Bogart's character Rick was considered a "sentimentalist" because of his history which included running guns to Ethiopia and fighting in Spain on the Loyalist side.⁴⁰

The positive use of the Spanish Civil War reflected the spread of Popular Front sentiment to Hollywood. After all, World War II, with the union of the United States and the Soviet Union, was the ultimate expression of the Popular Front. Nevertheless, as World War II progressed, the veterans of both the Lincoln Brigade and the Medical Brigade were seen as too radical, and were vastly distrusted within the ranks. They were given undesirable tasks, and African Americans were segregated from the troops once again.

Lincoln Brigade veterans had a difficult time reintegrating back into the United States work force. With the Great Depression still a reality, jobs were limited, and veterans were "discriminated against by employers because they [could not] show continuous residence and consistent employment record and experience." Doctors and nurses with special skills tended to fare better. Dr. Mark Strauss reopened his practice a mere two days after returning home. Keeping alive his previous Communist convictions and remaining loyal to the memory of Spain, he became a medical consultant to the Furrier's Union and provided free service for Spanish war veterans.⁴¹

With the surfacing of anti-Soviet sentiments in the Cold War, veterans of the Medical Brigade were no longer heroes, but traitors. Spain became synonymous with Communism and therefore the Soviet Union. In the era of McCarthy, they were blacklisted and tapped by the FBI, many ending up on trial, and still more losing their jobs. Ruth Davidow was harassed by the FBI, but was able to keep her job. The U.S. government even revoked former Brigade nurse Hilda Bell Roberts and her husbands' passports, refusing to let them leave the country.⁴²

The Medical Brigade's famous leader, Dr. Barsky was one of the first victims of the anti-Communist sweep across America. In 1946, Barsky became the head of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, which worked to send assistance to Spanish exiles and lobbied Congress to support the members of former Republican Spain. In January of the same year, Barsky and other officials of the organization received subpoenas to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. When the committee demanded a full accounting of the Joint Anti-Fascist Committee's transactions, Barsky refused. For his contempt of Congress, Barsky received a six month term, and was forced to spend five months in a federal penitentiary.

The New York State Medical Committee suspended his medical license for six more months and his appeal, which reached the Supreme Court in 1954, did little to help his situation. His only supporter was Justice William O. Douglas, who said, "When a doctor cannot save lives in America because he

is opposed to Franco in Spain, it is time to call a halt and look critically at the neurosis that has possessed us.”⁴³

No matter their treatment during the “Red Scare,” most Medical Brigade veterans remained highly socially conscious and politically active throughout the remainder of their days. When the government accused former nurse Lini Fuhr of Communist activity, she lost her civil service job as a public health nurse in Los Angeles. The government blacklisted her and she could not find anything save the most menial nursing work. Finally, she moved to Mexico, where she worked with a remote rural population. Nurses Lini de Vries and Fredericka Martin also joined her, working with the impoverished people of Central America.

The Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) remained politically involved, though the Popular Front had dissolved long ago and their ties to the Communist Party were a memory. The veterans took up a new cause, when during the 1980s, the Reagan administration began attacks against the Sandistas regime of Nicaragua. Many veterans noted direct parallels to Spain, including the involvement of the super power, which now instead of Germany and Italy, was the United States. Veteran Bob Reed said: “In the United States during the Spanish war the cry was ‘Lift the Embargo!’ Now it seems to me that ‘Hands off Nicaragua’ is very appropriate.” Former ambulance driver Ted Velfort visited Nicaragua and noticed the lack of medical supplies in the country, he petitioned to the organization for help.

Reminiscent of their rallies for supplies to Spain in the 1930s, VALB began an ambulance supply project, raising enough for two ambulances in 1984 and seven more the following year.⁴⁴ For American Spanish Civil War veterans, political activism remained an integral part of their daily lives.

Nearly sixty years after her return from Spain, former Nurse Ruth Davidow has yet to lose her sense of political commitment. In a video interview playing at the City Museum of New York's exhibition, *Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War*, she pauses to look straight at the camera before saying: "Justice should exist everywhere. It's no different in Nicaragua, no different in El Salvador, no different in South America... We learned in Spain to act instead of just take it. That's what maintains us after fifty years: we still know how to act, to take action."⁴⁵

NOTES FOR CHAPTER THREE

- ¹ Publication in the *New Masses* to raise support for medical aid to Spain. May 11, 1937.
- ² Tamiment Library, New York University, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (henceforth referred to as ALBA), Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 5, Folder 17.
- ³ Description of rally and quotations from: *New York Times*. July 20, 1937. 12.
- ⁴ *The New Masses*. May 25, 1937. 26.
- ⁵ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 6, folder 30.
- ⁶ Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. "One Year in Spain." (New York: 1938) 3.
- ⁷ Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks. *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*. (New York and London: 1996) 257.
- ⁸ Ibid. 239-241.
- ⁹ Ibid. 238.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. 262, 269.
- ¹¹ American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. "From A Hospital in Spain" (New York: 1937) 12.
- ¹² Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Columbia University, Spanish Refugee Relief Collection, Box 22.
- ¹³ "Spanish Diary." *The New Masses*. June 14, 1938.
- ¹⁴ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Collection, Box 11, Folder 7.
- ¹⁵ *The Daily Worker*. June 9, 1938.
- ¹⁶ The Negro Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain." (New York: 1937) 10, 14.
- ¹⁷ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Collection, Box 11, Folder 16.
- ¹⁸ Manuscript for "Half of Spain Died": Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, H. Matthews Collection, Box 13.
- ¹⁹ Herbert Matthews. *A World in Revolution*. (New York: 1972) 11, 13, 42.
- ²⁰ *San Francisco Chronicle*. January 12, 1938.
- ²¹ *San Francisco Examiner*. July 12, 1938.
- ²² Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 95.
- ²³ Matthews. *Revolution*. 41.
- ²⁴ Gelhorn, Martha. "Only the Shells Whine." *Collier's*. July 17, 1937. p. 13.
- ²⁵ Josephine Herbst. *The Starched Blue Sky of Spain*. (New York: 1991) 132-135.
- ²⁶ Both Parker and Gelhorn's commentary found in: *Into the Fire: American Women in the Spanish Civil War* 2002.
- ²⁷ On authors: Murray Sperber. *And I Remember Spain; a Spanish Civil War Anthology*. (New York: 1974); 203-205, 233. On intellectuals: Carroll, Peter. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. (Stanford: 1994) 88.
- ²⁸ Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 243.
- ²⁹ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, folder 3.
- ³⁰ On Barsky and sending wounded across the border: Arthur H. Landis. *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. (New York: 1967) 495-496.
- ³¹ Ibid. 496.
- ³² Ibid. 588.
- ³³ Ibid. 589.
- ³⁴ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.
- ³⁵ Copy of statement issued by VALB, 1938: Arthur Landis. *Abraham Lincoln*. 594.
- ³⁶ *New York Times*. January 22, 1939.
- ³⁷ Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Columbia University, Spanish Refugee Relief Collection, *The Herald Tribune*. January 23, 1939.
- ³⁸ Peter Carroll. *The Odyssey*. 210.

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- ³⁹Commentary by Dorothy Fontane: *Into the Fire: American Women in the Spanish Civil War* 2002; Fredericka Martin: *San Francisco Chronicle*. Feb. 10, 1977. 22.
- ⁴⁰Films that reflected the views of the Popular Front during the late 1930s and early 1940s: Michael Curtiz. *Casablanca*. 1942; William Dieterle. *Blockade*. 1938; John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway. *The Spanish Earth*. 1937; Sam Wood. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. 1944.
- ⁴¹Cary Nelson. *Madrid 1937*. 214.
- ⁴²Ruth Davidow Interviewed by Frances Patai; Jan. 20, 1992, San Francisco, The Papers of Frances Patai, Box 1; Folder 7; Hilda Bell Roberts Interviewed by Frances Patai, San Francisco, Jan 15, 1991. ALBA, The Papers of Frances Patai, Box 1; Folder 3.
- ⁴³Peter Carroll. *The Odyssey*. 286.
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.* 373-374.
- ⁴⁵Taken from the City Museum of New York's documentary film: Jaime D. Fernández and Kate Harper. *Facing Fascism: New Yorkers Remember the Spanish Civil War*. 2007.

CONCLUSION

The American Medical Brigade along with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade represented the culmination of internationalism and social consciousness during the mid 1930s. Organized by the Communist Party, volunteers were ready to go to any length, even offer their lives, to stop Franco's advancing fascist armies. Forty years after the fact, Dr. Alba Ryan stated, "It was the only big thing worth while I did in my life. It gave me an insight into World Revolution."¹

Doctors and nurses kept up the pretext of their Communist Party mantra, instated by the International Brigades and political commissars. Letters home were cheerful, telegrams told tales of a rough war, but nothing that couldn't be won. The Medical Brigade sent all correspondence through a rose filter, aimed at rallying the American Left and gaining enough popular support to lift the Roosevelt administration's embargo.

On the hospital front, the picture was less blithe. Facilities were practically unbearable, supplies limited, and to make matters worse, the Red Cross symbol was nothing more than a bull's eye to Franco's Rebel bombs. Demoralization and loss of faith grated on the volunteers, many who had committed to the journey with high Communist ideals. Volunteers left America expecting to create a utopia of human equality, but even in the

hospital this proved impossible. Under harsh conditions, doctors quarreled, nurses contracted exhaustion, and all the while, bombs dropped around their haphazardly set up hospitals.

In 1977, at the forty year anniversary of the Battle of Jarama, the now wrinkled Fredericka Martin looked back on her first entrance into Spain, admitting that she had no idea what would ensue. “We were so romantic when we started out. We looked like such a very important force, so elegant... The people in the fields stopped working—they couldn’t believe their eyes. They thought we were forerunners of the American government’s approval.” Most Medical Brigade members were of a similar opinion. They thought they simply had to set an example, gain enough public approval, somehow change Roosevelt’s mind, but this never came to pass. As the war grated on, it became more and more evident that they were alone in their fight. Martin finished, “To our shame, we were never able to get the government to that position.”²

Forty years after the fact, veterans of the Medical Brigade were less ideological than they had been in their youth. For many, such as Dr. Barsky, the war never ended. In his memoir he wrote: “Modern wars are not like the wars of the past. They concern you more than the wars of the past concerned your father or your grandfather... Wars more and more are becoming wars of psychology and so they do not necessarily end when the physical conflict is terminated.” Barsky remained active in radical politics until his death in

February of 1975. In the same vein, perhaps in response to the psychological traumas during the Spanish Civil War, Dr. William Pike, Dr. John Simons, Dr. Sidney Rinz, Dr. Sidney Vogel, Dr. Aaron Hilkewitch, and Dr. Sam Gordon all returned from Spain to train as psychiatrists. Something on that battle front had changed them.³

Veteran Ruth Davidow claimed that the Spanish struggle would always remain a poignant memory. In an interview years later she stated, “We had no narcotics. Remember that we could not take their pain away.” She paused to look at her hands before saying, “That always haunts me.”⁴

The Spanish Civil War remained within them all. Fredericka Martin, the energetic “mother” to the hospital nurses, moved with her husband to the Pribilof Islands, 300 miles off the coast of Alaska, where she became an aficionado in Aleut culture and language, publishing several books and translations on the subject. Though she moved literally thousands of miles from Spain, she did not forget her hospital experience. She named her first daughter Tobyanne, for Toby Jensky and Anne Taft, two nurses in the Medical Brigade. In her last years, she moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico with former Brigade nurse Lini DeVries and volunteered as a nurse to the impoverished people of the countryside. Even years after the Spanish Civil War, she remained committed to her ideals of public work, internationalism, and generally helping those in need.

The story of the American Medical Brigade is one of heroism, internationalism, and allegiance to the Popular Front of the 1930s. For a brief time in history, Communists, Socialists, liberals, and simple anti-fascists joined together with one goal: the defeat of Franco. Behind their Party slogans and optimistic tales, medical personnel were normal human beings, subject to fear in the face of wartime violence. Their story displays the tensions between fervent political beliefs and the horrible reality of one of the bloodiest wars in world history. In the words of ambulance driver Carl Rahman, “It damn near ruined me psychologically! But I don’t regret going—not for a minute.”⁵

NOTES FOR CONCLUSION

¹ Tamiment Library, New York University, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (henceforth referred to as ALBA), Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, folder 5.

² *San Francisco Chronicle*. Feb. 10, 1977. 22.

³ Commentary by Barsky: ALBA, Edward Barsky Papers, Box. 5, folder 21, 295-296; Statistics of psychiatrists: Box 5, folder 28.

⁴ : Jaime D. Fernández and Kate Harper. *Facing Fascism: New Yorkers Remember the Spanish Civil War*. 2007.

⁵ ALBA, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 11, Folder 16.

APPENDIX

Figure 1. Map of American hospitals in Spain

Figure 2. Dr. Edward Barsky in a hospital tent¹

Figure 3. Nurse Salaria Kee aids in operation²



Figure 4. Nurse Anne Taft operates with Dr. Byrne³



Figure 5. Lincoln Brigade member Moe Fishman with Dr. Irving Busch, Dr. Barsky, and Jack Klein, D.D. S.⁴



Figure 6. Nurse Toby Jensky in her Medical Brigade uniform⁵



Figure 7. Evelyn Hutchins, the only female ambulance driver in Spain⁶



Figure 8. Secretary and Interpreter Mildred Rackley⁷



Figure 9. 1937 rally in Madison Square Garden⁸



Figure 10. Ambulance to Spain⁹



Figure 11. Pamphlet put out by the Medical Bureau in 1937¹⁰



Figure 12. American nurses gathered at Albacete¹¹



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM:

¹ Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks. *Madrid 1937: Letters From the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. (New York: 1996).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Peter Carroll and James D. Fernández. *Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War*. (New York: 1997).

⁷ Peter Carroll. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. (Stanford: 1994).

⁸ Carroll. *Facing Fascism*.

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¹⁰ Nelson. *Madrid 1937*.

¹¹ Carroll. *Odyssey*.

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