

I N P R I N T

Still a good fight

By Paul Buhle

The Spanish Civil War has proved to be the most enduring lost cause of the century. For a moment during the anti-fascist enthusiasm of World War II, the brave defense of Spanish democracy by American citizen-soldier-idealists a few years earlier even threatened to become the romantic set-piece of the age. In *Casablanca*, Humphrey Bogart's unforgettable Rick confessed that he had run weapons to the Loyalists, decisive proof that behind the cynical exterior lay a generous heart. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway's characters fight with a similar mixture of idealism and existentialism—hardly hoping to win but determined to fight the evil spreading through the world.

In real life, Loyalist troops practically introduced *partisan*-style guerrilla warfare, and their practical experience as well as their international contacts later proved invaluable to the Allied war effort. In losing, they had somehow also won.

By the late '30s, however, the Dies Committee was already investigating survivors of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion for early signs of disloyalty. By 1950, the vets were pursued collectively and individually by the FBI, blacklisted from jobs and branded the cowardly agents of Stalin by politicians and journalists who never saw an hour of real anti-fascist combat. Decades later, Ronald Reagan—who spent World War II in Hollywood, making frequent public appearances with Spanish Civil War veterans and other left-wingers—told reporters that the volunteers had fought for the wrong side.

Peter N. Carroll, author of a superb everyday-life study of the '70s, *It Seemed Like Nothing Ever Happened*, has returned to the bloody battlefields of the war and the murky political debates in its aftermath, sifting familiar evidence, interviewing large numbers of vets and poring through previously unknown archival materials in Moscow. One could never describe Carroll as neutral: he is the chair of the Board of Governors of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. But he is also probably the least partisan of the various authors—usually polemicists for one side or another in the various controversies—to describe the American combat-

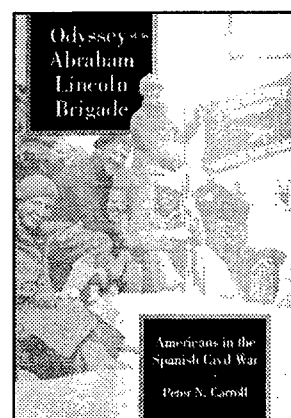
ants since their return from Spain in 1938.

As an oral history document, *The Odyssey* is a brilliant effort, marked by sensitivity to the interviewees and a deep feeling for their experience before and after Spain. Previous volumes, such as Arthur Landis' *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (1968), unearthed considerable battlefield evidence, and Robert Rosenstone's *Crusade of the Left* (1969) provided an important measure of political context on the home front. But Carroll goes deeper into the personalities of the vets, and the after-effects of the war upon them.

Carroll traces the awakening of future combatants to radicalism and to the prospects of volunteering to fight in a war most Americans regarded as utterly distant and unwanted. The volunteers were mostly Jewish and working-class, but the admixture of Yankee radicals, creative writers, African-American politicians and idealists makes for a fascinating story. The book moves along through the various ups and downs of extremely active and generally admirable lives in which the memory of Spain plays a still central role.

Unfortunately, Carroll's account, drawn from the perspective of the vets themselves, allows too little for the contradictions that have bothered so many others, from war observers to scholars. The Lincolns fought for freedom—but volunteering for duty in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion depended in most if not all cases on a firm belief in the world Communist movement under Moscow's leadership. This came at a time when the lack of internal party democracy in America and growing tendencies to despotism in Russia turned many an erstwhile party member away in disillusionment. Furthermore, volunteering took a kind of personal recklessness that friends, shopmates, wives and mothers could often scarcely understand. The issue raises psychological questions unresolvable by political interpretation alone and not fully answered by the vets' own accounts.

In the end, about 2,600 Americans fought in Spain, with another 150 serving as doctors, nurses, technicians and drivers. So outgunned were they by Francisco Franco's army and its German and Italian suppliers that the situation would have been almost comical were it not so tragic. (Observer George Orwell agreed, writing in 1943: "The Fascists won because they were the stronger; they had the modern arms and the others hadn't. No political strategy could offset that.") Virtually untrained men with nothing but raw courage and ideological persuasion confronted their own well-founded fears. To hold the line against the



The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade
By Peter N. Carroll
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Fascists was miraculous; to have done more was impossible. Narrating their tale, Carroll brings us back to some of the most hair-raising military adventures of the century, and to some of the most interesting as well as unlikely combatants the printed page may ever see. He skillfully untangles some old mysteries and humanizes the historic picture in a remarkably candid and straightforward manner, disarming the reader who has plowed through too many ideology-laden histories of the war.

It would be pleasant to leave the story here, with ragged heroes at the front and determined organizers (such as *In These Times*' former co-publisher Bill Sennett) bringing up the rear. But the brave figures had been plunged into a political situation they understood badly, and readers will find little here to help them sort it all out. At the election of a Popular Front government in 1936, thousands of Spanish farmers simply ceased paying rent to landlords, agricultural day laborers occupied the land they cultivated, villages dumped municipal councils and put their own democratic forms in place, railwaymen struck to demand nationalization of railroads, and many other workers moved toward socialization of their workplaces. Instead of quashing these revolutionary anarchists and syndicalists, Fascist leader Francisco Franco's revolt only strengthened their resolve. They practically extinguished the existing state apparatus across Catalonia and in many rural locations, replacing them with the most advanced socialistic or cooperative institutions yet seen in the modern world.

Of course, Stalin had no intention of encouraging the kind of revolutionary behavior that had made the Russian workers' councils (i.e., soviets) possible a generation earlier. In a perverse sequel to the events of 1914, when Europe's socialist and anarchist leaders widely betrayed their ideals by enlisting in the war that opened the continent to mass destruction and soon to fascism, Comintern leaders set themselves on eradicating the Spanish revolution in the name of anti-fascism. The Loyalist government, dependent upon Russian support, did everything possible to sabotage industrial and agrarian self-management, while supplies and propaganda built up a Spanish Communist Party that had never previously been a particularly important or attractive vehicle.

The American volunteers hardly registered the significance of these developments. Willing to die to defeat Franco's armies as the advance guard of Hitler and Mussolini, they knew only of anarchist "disruptions" weakening the fight. Could not a revolutionary nation have fought Franco more effectively? The debate is still open. But if Stalin's behavior rightly finds few defenders anywhere on earth

these days, the willingness of the United States, France and Britain to appease even the most bloodthirsty anti-communists before 1941 and after 1945 casts a pall over liberalism as large as that over Stalinism. Stalin may have undermined the fight against fascism in the pursuit of his own goals, but in their dubious "neutrality" the nations of the West in fact favored Franco.

In the aftermath of Spain, World War II became inevitable. So did the complex and convoluted war over the legacy of the defeated American volunteers. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was bitterly condemned by Communist Party officials (a few vets privately offered him their apologies). After the honeymoon period of World War II, when Hollywood Communists actually wrote dialogue for some of the best battle pictures, the Cold War wiped out any temporary gains in public sympathy. Increasingly persecuted, the veterans probably

hit a low point of political morale in 1953 when Dwight Eisenhower signed a mutual assistance pact with the slippery old enemy, Franco.

The Lincolns, nevertheless, trudged on, many of them active in the civil rights and, later, anti-war movements. The '80s found them raising funds and consciousness for the revolutionary government of Nicaragua—besieged by contras who looked very much like Franco's legions and by backers like Oliver North sounding strangely like the '30s U.S. fascist sympathizers. Getting old and weak but still proud in defeat, the vets could be seen in any mass Washington demonstration, carrying their aged banners. A few were even on hand for the turnout against the Gulf War. Most have long since abandoned faith in Communism with a big "C," but not in the cooperative visions that inspired their sacrifice.

Carroll waxes sentimental about the old idealists, which is natural and perhaps inevitable. True to the contemporary impulse behind oral history, it's the culture of the war that seems the most intriguing at the moment. To mark the 60th anniversary of the conflict next year, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, based at Brandeis University, has a traveling exhibit of the posters made for the Loyalists by some of the most famed artists of the times, in styles that range from socialist realism to dadaism and constructivism. A happy eclecticism and a salute to utopianism as well as determination, this may offer, along with Carroll's book, the best way yet to remember the Lincolns' crusade. ◀

Paul Buhle founded the Oral History of the American Left archive at Tamiment Library, New York University. His next book, *A Dreamer's Paradise Lost: Louis C. Fraina/Lewis Corey (1892-1953)*, is due out in December from Humanities Press.



Poets Langston Hughes and Edwin Rolfe both served in Spain.

Elvis and Fidel

By Christopher Phelps

The first North Americans to join up with Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement in the Sierra Maestra were not cadres of the organized left or professional adventurers but three army brats—juvenile delinquents, in effect—who had run away from the Guantanamo naval base. Their motivations were scarcely political. "We just heard so much about how, uh, about how Batista was so cruel and he was a dictatorship, and how with the war in Hungary and the people fighting for people there, we just felt moved to come here," Chuck Ryan, at 21 years the oldest of the boys, told a documentary filmmaker at the time.

The highly original, if sometimes stretched, thesis of Van Gosse's *Where the Boys Are* is that such impulses to act in solidarity with the Cuban Revolution in its earliest moments derived less from conventional left-wing political commitments than from a romantic ethos of youthful male rebellion extending from pop-culture "bad boys" like James Dean and Elvis Presley to the virile figure of Fidel Castro himself. In an age of bland paternalism, symbolized by the fatherly Eisenhower, "*fidelismo* signalled a reassertion of creative and heroic masculinity in the widest sense."

North American youths transferred to Cuba's bearded ones the mystique of an imagined world of rebellious possibility first glimpsed in movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One*. In 1957, Hank di Suvero, who later founded SLATE, the Berkeley student party that helped create a new campus radicalism, hatched a scheme for joining the Cuban rebels that involved seven undergraduate friends and two jeeps. A similarly juvenile fascination with the revolution was explored in Glendon Swarthout's 1960 novel *Where the Boys Are*, in which several college boys attempt to prolong their 1958 spring break with a half-assed plan to get their fellow Florida revelers to join them on an expedition to Cuba. (Hollywood expunged the Cuba subplot from its film version of the novel.)

Even the angry young writers of the Beat generation were drawn to Fidel's allure. "The grounding of Yankee

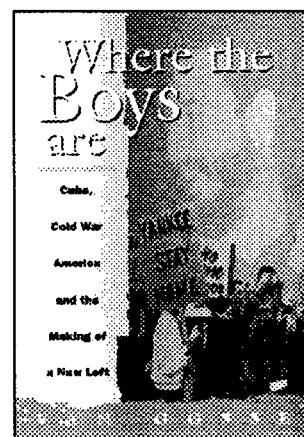
fidelismo," Gosse writes, "was the extrapolitical world of spontaneous action for its own sake, what Norman Mailer defined as Hipsterism." Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and LeRoi Jones were all moved to write poems and prose of solidarity. New York bohemians even formed a League of Militant Poets, imploring the world in May 1962: "Put your bombs away. Don't waste blood fighting history in Vietnam, Laos, Cuba. Turn with us to love, beauty and the dream of Whitman."

Where the Boys Are is distinguished from the current blizzard of books on Cuba and the United States because it traces the countries' relations in popular consciousness and social movements, not state policy. Its bold emphasis on the significance of male solidarity sets it apart from conventional histories of '60s radicalism.

Yet Gosse's partisanship for the New Left costs him the opportunity to more frankly and critically explore its failings. Often this political weakness is compounded by a curious unwillingness to examine the very paradoxes Gosse's own cultural analysis brings to the fore. For example, the very factors that lent appeal to the Cuban rebels—the reception of Fidel as a Hollywood hero, the romance of action for action's sake, the aspiration to dispense with theory, the cult of youth and style—replicated dominant patterns of culture in the United States, making the early New Left as much a product of advanced capitalism as a challenge to it.

It is strange, too, that a study so informed by gender analysis gives no consideration to how the allure of *fidelismo* affected the internal character of the New Left. Did the appeal of *machismo* reinforce the notorious chauvinism of male leaders in the civil rights and antiwar movements? Homosexuality, too, is given short shrift, despite the evident homoerotic appeal of *fidelismo*—itself a peculiarity, given Castro's hostility to homosexuality. Gosse ignores entirely the disenchantment with Cuba experienced by many gay New Leftists, prominent among them Alan Young, whose book *Gays Under the Cuban Revolution* poignantly recounted the contradictions between his sexual and political identities.

Where the Boys Are also suffers from the unspoken presumption that any criticism of the Cuban state puts one on the slippery slope to counterrevolution. One is either a *fidelista* or in the camp of empire. And so a group of socialists who accompanied their public condemnation of the Bay of Pigs invasion with



Where the Boys Are:
Cuba, Cold War America
and the Making
of a New Left
By Van Gosse
Verso
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