The United States and World Fascism: Teaching Human Rights through the Spanish Civil War

Sebastiaan Faber
Oberlin College

They are, says Canute Frankson, "a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power" (Nelson and Hendricks 33–35). According to Henry Wallace, they are "most easily recognized by their deliberate perversion of truth and fact": "Their newspapers and propaganda carefully cultivate every fissure of disunity." What is more, they "use isolationism as a slogan to conceal their own selfish imperialism" and "claim to be super-patriots, but . . . would destroy every liberty guaranteed by the Constitution" (Wallace 7). They are "our problem," Hy Katz adds. What they represent "may come to us as it came in other countries" (Nelson and Hendricks 31–33).

Current as they may sound, these warnings are more than seventy years old. Canute Frankson was born in Jamaica in 1890; he had emigrated to the United States when he was 27 and worked as a mechanic in an automobile plant in Detroit, Michigan. Hy Katz, born in 1914, was the son of Polish immigrants in Brooklyn, New York. Henry Wallace, the oldest of the three, was born in 1888. He served as the thirty-third Vice President of the United States (1941–45) and as Secretary of Agriculture (1933–40) and Commerce (1945–46). The three hailed from different generations, ethnicities, classes, and cultures. What they had in common was their aversion of fascism—and their conviction that it had to be stopped.

Frankson and Katz volunteered to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War after the Second Republic was attacked by a Hitler- and Mussolini-backed military coup in 1936. The passages quoted above are from letters they wrote from Spain. Frankson's letter, date-marked Albacete, July 6, 1937, is to a friend. Katz writes on November 25 of that same year, to his mother, who had only just found out what her son was doing in Europe. ("Claire writes me that you know I'm in Spain," he tells her. "Of course, you know that the reason I didn't tell you where I was is that I didn't want to hurt you" [Nelson and Hendricks 31–33]) Wallace's quotes are from a later and much more public text: a 1,800-word article published in the *New York Times* on April 9, 1944, in which the then-Vice President tried to define—and warn his readers against—what he called "American Fascism."

Why should we consider now, almost two decades into the twenty-first century, how these three men defined a political phenomenon they saw emerging around them in the 1930s and 40s? More to the point, why should middle- or high-school students care?

Two years ago, on election night in November 2016, "fascism" was the most looked-up word on Merriam-Webster's website. In that year's overall ranking, it came in second. Since then, as we know, the concept has emerged with increasing urgency in public debate. In 2018, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—who in 1938 was forced to leave her native Prague in the wake of Nazi aggression—published her book *Fascism: A Warning.* In early 2017, the historian Timothy Snyder published *On Tyranny*, which, like Albright's book, returns to the worst moments of twentieth-century history in search of lessons for the present.

So what is fascism? And is it really making a comeback? Those who turned to the dictionary on election night found the following description: "a political philosophy, movement, or regime

(such as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition." Definitions like these are useful, to be sure. Yet they are not necessarily productive from a pedagogical point of view. For young people today who want to learn about fascism, it's one thing to read a dictionary or textbook definition—but it's quite another to read first-hand how fascism was observed, experienced, and defined by people on the ground who translated their analysis of the political situation into concrete action. A black Jamaican machinist from Detroit and a 23-year-old Jewish-American in Civil-War Spain, for example; or FDR's right-hand man three months before D-day.

In the past couple of years, hundreds of high-school students in the United States have come across these three texts by Frankson, Katz, and Wallace in their Social Studies and Spanish classes. What has made this possible is a professional-development program initiated ten years ago by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA), an educational non-profit based in New York City dedicated to promoting social activism and the defense of human rights. Founded in 1979 by the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB), ALBA is devoted to the preservation and dissemination of the history of the North American involvement in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and its aftermath. ALBA took the initiative to create a physical archive documenting this role. This archive, which continues to grow, is now held at New York University's Tamiment Library. Since 2008, ALBA has organized workshops in which middle- and high-school teachers design lesson plans around a carefully curated collection of compelling, accessible primary-source documents from this and other archives—textual, visual, and audiovisual—that allow students to reflect on important historical and ethical questions while working to meet state standards and subject-specific learning goals.

The Spanish Civil War as a subject is rarely taught in American secondary schools. In the Social Studies curriculum, it is often squeezed out between the Great Depression and the Second World War. While the topic is more likely to come up in advanced Spanish classes, even there the treatment is generally superficial, as a backdrop to the work of Picasso or García Lorca, or as the historical context to a contemporary film like *La lengua de las mariposas* or *El laberinto del Fauno*. This absence from the United States high-school curriculum is not altogether surprising. For one, the story of the United States' official position in the wake of the July 1936 coup in Spain—strict neutrality—does not quite fit the still-dominant narrative of the "greatest generation" defeating the absolute evil of Nazism. Second, the stories of the 2,800 or so American volunteers who did decide to fight fascism in Spain—and who would later become known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—are complicated to tell. As leftist activists, often members of the Communist Party, they became suspect during the red scare in the years of the Cold War. In army circles during World War II, they were known as "premature antifascists."

The fact that American middle- and high-school students often skip over the war in Spain is unfortunate. The Spanish Civil War is a crucial event in twentieth-century world and US history—key for a proper understanding the origins of World War II and the Holocaust. It also marks an extraordinary moment of cultural and political triangulation between the United States, Spain, and Latin America. And it is a crucial chapter in the history of art, literature, and journalism: beyond Picasso, the war shaped the careers of authors and artists as diverse as Ernest Hemingway, Martha Gellhorn, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, George Orwell, Virginia Woolf, John Dos Passos, David Siqueiros, and Paul Robeson.

In fact, studying the war in Spain, its aftermath, and its reception in the United States offers an outstanding opportunity to introduce students to major historical, political, and cultural questions; to reframe the common narratives of US and world history; and to highlight those extraordinary connections among the United States, Spain, and Latin America. Analyzing and debating primary sources from this period also helps our students understand how political

ideas and ideals shape people's lives, moving them to make difficult and sometimes dangerous choices—allowing our students, in turn, to become more skilled consumers and producers of information, and more effective global citizens.

The ALBA workshops encourage teachers to focus on ten "essential questions" that transcend the specificity of twentieth-century history. Why should we care about events that happen far away, or that happened a long time ago? How do we decide who is on the right side of an armed conflict? When do we stand up for what we believe in? What are our obligations in the face of injustice? How do we resolve competing loyalties? When is it right, or necessary, for a powerful country like the US to intervene in a conflict going on elsewhere? How do images and texts shape our view of the world—and how can we use them to shape others' views? How can we understand people and events of the past in their context? When—and how—is it appropriate to judge people and events in the past? When do historical analogies apply? And what does fascism look like today?

When ALBA started out with its workshops in 2008, they almost exclusively focused on the history of the Lincoln Brigade. In the past three years, however, ALBA has expanded their scope to a full-fledged human-rights curriculum that extends into the present. (This development connects with the broader rise of human-rights education in the United States, thanks to the work of organizations like Facing History and Ourselves [facing.org] or Human Rights Educators USA [hreusa.org].) Now titled "The United States and World Fascism: Human Rights from the Spanish Civil War to Nuremberg and Beyond," the ALBA workshops identify several large themes that were central to the Spanish Civil War but have lost little of their relevancy. These include the question of whether, and when, the United States has the right or duty to intervene in the affairs of other nations (human rights and foreign policy); how citizens and states are to respond to refugee and migration crises (human rights and international law); what position a government and its citizens should adopt toward civil or state violence and other forms of past injustice (historical memory and transitional justice); and what it means to be an activist (the ethics of citizenship).

The workshops generally start out with a clip from the documentary *The Good Fight: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War* (1984) about the different ways in which US citizens, media, and government reacted to the rise of Nazism and Fascism. Next, the teachers look at the Katz and Frankson letters along with Wallace's *New York Times* article to consider this same question based on primary sources from the period, carefully placing them into their US and global context. The workshop then moves into visual media, with a segment on the way propaganda posters and war photography helped frame the narrative of the Spanish Civil War, always with the goal of eliciting a particular kind of action in the public. Next, a set of letters and an oral-history clip allow for a discussion about the question of values and loyalties—when do you stand up for what you believe in, and what difficult negotiations factor into such a decision?

To get to the vexed question of intervention versus non-intervention, the participants look at four sets of texts: Roosevelt's "Quarantine Speech" of 1937 along with editorial reactions to it; FDR's 1941 fireside chat following the Nazi attack on the USS Greer, along with a speech given that same day by Charles Lindbergh, star aviator and spokesman of the America First Committee; a 1945 letter by FDR to the American ambassador in Madrid about Franco's links with the Nazis and Fascists, along with a transcribed dialogue between Milton Wolff, an American veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and an official from Truman's State Department, which paints quite a different picture of the Spanish regime; and finally a published text by Wolff urging US action toward Franco's Spain along with an excerpt of the Truman Doctrine of 1947.

The following section focuses on ethics. It does so by considering two separate questions. First, do political refugees have rights, and what responsibilities do governments have toward them? And second, how did the aftermath of the Holocaust shape the development

of international justice? Here, the workshop considers contemporary articles on the Spanish Republican refugee crisis and selected materials from the Nuremberg trials, along with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Moving into the Cold War period, the workshop next looks at the way the Spanish Civil War was framed during the postwar years, leading to the surveillance and persecution of the surviving American veterans of the war in Spain. A next section looks at the US Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam war.

The day closes with an open discussion about the way these topics—from international intervention and the rights of migrants and refugees to historical memory and historical justice and the responsibilities of citizenship—continue to be relevant to middle- and high-school students today. What is the most productive and responsible way for teachers to encourage their students to consider and debate these important questions in the classroom?

Although the focus of the workshops is primarily historical and ethical, Spanish teachers find them quite inspiring. The primary-source resource binder includes a broad range of materials for the Spanish language and culture classroom: dozens of propaganda posters in Spanish and Catalan; Spanish Civil War photography; artifacts from the time period (such as the "carnet de activista" of an American volunteer); letters written by Spanish soldiers to a young New York pen pal; articles and speeches by Concha Espina and Franco himself; and, of course, short stories and poetry. The possibilities for combination are many. Pablo Neruda's gripping poem "Madrid 1936," for example, can be read in conjunction with Picasso's *Guernica*, but also with the letters by Katz and Frankson.

One clear advantage that middle and high school Spanish teachers have over their colleagues in Social Studies is that they tend to wield more autonomy over the content of their lessons. History classes are often constrained by a long, state-mandated list of obligatory topics, leaving barely a couple of days for "extra" materials. Spanish teachers who have attended an ALBA workshop, by contrast, have often been able to design one- or two-week units around the ALBA source materials—including film screenings, role plays, and research projects—that allow students to practice a broad range of vocabulary and grammar points. Many teachers also use ALBA's comprehensive online database of US volunteers in Spain (www.alba-valb.org/volunteers) to explore the lives of Lincoln Brigade members from their city or region.

Sean di Renzo, who teaches all levels of Spanish at North Olmsted High School in Ohio, has participated in two ALBA workshops. "Students won't learn unless they are engaged—we have known this for a long time," he wrote in the September, 2012 issue of *The Volunteer*, ALBA's quarterly magazine (www.albavolunteer.org).

> The challenge is to *get* them engaged. As a high school Spanish teacher, it's a problem I face every day. In my quest to cultivate in my students the passion I have for the language and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world, I have found that few topics work as well as the Spanish Civil War. When taught properly, the topic allows students not only to learn about a major historical event but to think, write, and talk about political, moral, and cultural questions that are as relevant today as they were 75 years ago.

Armed with the ALBA materials, Di Renzo set out to introduce the workshop subject matter, in some form, into all his Spanish classes, from Spanish 1 through AP. "Before my participation in the institute, my students regularly asked me about facts, names, terms and dates," he writes.

> After I re-tooled my instruction, their questions gave rise to lively, full-class debates about questions of defining and establishing justice and making peace with the past for the benefit of the future. My students had attained a working knowledge of facts, names, terms and dates—and they used Spanish vocabulary to do so—but they also wrestled with complex ethical and moral questions. The Spanish Civil War had grabbed my students' attention

> because they could understand that it was an event in which a great deal was at stake: life, death, liberty, stability. Now, however, I had their attention *and* their curiosity to dig deeper. I also had materials that helped to tie a war in Spain 75 years ago to the lives of those who lived in surrounding Ohio cities; and to show the global reach of the conflict and its connections to other 20th century events, most notably World War II.

The ALBA materials also provide opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. At Bergen Academies in New Jersey, Sergei Alschen (History) and Gabriela Calandra (Spanish) for several years co-taught a trimester-long class in which students combined work in Spanish with historical analysis. The course culminated in students' designing their own activist project around a cause about which they felt strongly. Reflecting this multi-pronged approach, the learning objectives included analytical skills ("conduct archival research"; "examine and interpret art work that contains a political message"), historical insight ("determine the impact of poverty, oppression, and discrimination on the radicalization of politics"), and future-oriented action ("determine what form of political activism is appropriate for students today"). Similarly, at Stuyvesant High School in New York in 2014, students in Spanish 3, AP Language, and AP Literature crowned their units based on ALBA-curated source materials with a presentation of original poems, fictional letters written from the perspective of an imagined American volunteer in Spain, and a showcase of original political posters, inspired by Spanish poster art, on contemporary issues, including immigration, state surveillance, and human rights.

Since 2008, ALBA has taught more than fifty workshops in ten states. At most locations, the workshop leaders work in alliance with a local college or university as well as the local school district, in the process strengthening the ties between institutions of higher education and the surrounding secondary schools. Fortunately, both parties increasingly welcome these types of collaboration. For colleges and universities, educational outreach beyond the campus has become imperative for political and recruitment reasons. School districts, meanwhile, face stricter state standards that increase the demand for high-quality professional development opportunities. For academic Hispanists, working with middle- or high-school teachers can be a rewarding experience—aside from the fact that many of the materials included in the workshops will also serve the participating faculty to include into their own college-level classes. Finally, because the workshops give college students who are interested in pursuing a teaching career an opportunity to get their feet wet.

For more information on the ALBA workshops—including some 25 detailed lesson plans for Spanish, Social Studies, and English Language Arts—go to resources.alba-valb.org or contact the author at sfaber@oberlin.edu. ALBA's teaching workshops are generously sponsored by the Puffin Foundation, Ohio Humanities, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and other partners.

WORKS CITED

Albright, Madeleine. *Fascism: A Warning.* New York: Harper Collins, 2018.

Di Renzo, Sean. "Why *Not* Teach the Spanish Civil War?" *The Volunteer* vol. 29, no. 3, September 2012, pp. 4–5.

Nelson, Cary, and Jefferson Hendricks, editors. *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War.* Routledge, 1996.

Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century.* Random House, 2017.

Wallace, Henry A. "Wallace Defines 'American Fascism.'" *New York Times*, 9 April 1944, p. 7.