Who were the international volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, and what motivated them to participate?

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I was very ignorant about Spain. I'm certain of this. I might have known a bit about the political aspects of the Civil War but I didn't know much about Spain. You see we were concerned in those days – and I'm sure this applies to most people who went to Spain – primarily with the fight against fascism. After you hit Spain, you suddenly gathered that this was a Spanish war really . . .

Citizens of many countries around the world volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) because they saw it as an international ideological battleground upon which to further their own political and personal interests. Through international rhetoric and individual political beliefs, the Spanish Civil War was transformed by the foreign volunteers from a civil struggle between the Republic and rebel Nationalists into a war over a range of ideological dichotomies: Communism versus Fascism, democracy versus tyranny, progress versus tradition, the Church versus secularists and so on. This essay will outline the domestic context in Spain that sparked the Civil War and compare this to international understandings of and concerns regarding the War. The demographics of both the International Brigades and General Franco’s foreign volunteers will be described, as well as their political orientations. The motives of the volunteers in the International Brigades that fought for the Republic will be explored through the American Lincoln Brigade's letters and the writing and memoirs of Anglophone intellectuals. The political ideologies that underpinned the Nationalist foreign volunteers' motives will also be explored. It will be shown that while there was a broad spectrum of justifications made for volunteering, volunteers from both sides were motivated by internationally constructed ideological dichotomies as well as personal and domestic causes.

There were three major pre-existing domestic factors that contributed to the start of the Spanish Civil War. One of these factors was the Spanish Army, which was responsible for engineering the coup that sparked the War. The army had evolved into a powerful lobby

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1 Comment on the foreign volunteers from Lloyd Edmonds, an Australian who volunteered in the Spanish Civil War. Taken from A. Inglis, ed., Letters From Spain (George Allen & Unwin: North Sydney, 1985), p. 86.
group over the previous century, particularly since Spain's loss of empire in 1898. Secondly, the Church, and its attendant ultra-conservative and Manichaean style of Catholicism, was a divisive institution, oppositional to liberal Spanish governments and active in Spanish political and economic spheres.\textsuperscript{2} Lastly, uneven levels of development gave rise to a series of what Helen Graham terms 'culture wars: urban culture and cosmopolitan lifestyles versus rural tradition; secular against religious; authoritarianism against liberal political cultures; centre versus periphery; even youth against age...\textsuperscript{3} These dichotomies were then extrapolated and broadened by the international community to include Communism versus Fascism, Anarchism versus Communism, the worker versus the boss and democracy versus tyranny. Germany and Italy's support of General Franco's Spanish Nationalists, for example, helped to internationalise the Nationalists' fascist character, as well as make their aims and values appear synonymous with Italian and German fascist ideology. It was these international extrapolations of existing domestic dichotomies that motivated international volunteers to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

Volunteers came from all around the world to participate in Spain's Civil War, on both the Republican and Nationalist sides. The International Brigade, which fought for the Republic, boasted around 35-40,000 members, of which no more than 20,000 served at one time.\textsuperscript{4} Of these volunteers, most were French, Italian, German or Austrian. Americans, British and Canadians constituted 15 per cent of the total, and the rest was made up of a combination of Scandinavians, Dutch, Mexicans, Norwegians, Swiss, and Australians among others.\textsuperscript{5} Early foreign volunteers for the Spanish Republic tended to be young, middle-class and educated; they also possessed the means to travel abroad which meant money, a passport and travel knowhow.\textsuperscript{6} After the formation of the International Brigades by the Comintern, the Moscow-based Communist International, the class background of the volunteers broadened. Due to the fact that Comintern was the logistical mechanism through which Communist parties around the world enlisted and transported thousands of

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 2.
volunteers to Spain, the Republic's volunteers have been depicted as mostly Communists.\(^7\) While the Comintern founded the International Brigades, they benefited from, rather than created, the already existing international support for the Republic and the desire of individuals to volunteer to fight for it.\(^8\) Naturally, many of the volunteers were Communist party members, who went because their party called on them to do so. There is, however, strong evidence to indicate that many of them were not Communists: many of the Italians were anti-Communists for example, and many of the British volunteers were members of Labour or other left-wing groups.\(^9\) As M.W. Jackson puts it, 'Not all who went were Communists and not all Communists went'.\(^10\) The political nature of the Brigades was different to most armies due to their mixed nationalities and identification with a cause rather than a country. Though all the volunteers may have identified as anti-fascist, anti-fascism itself meant different things to different people; by 1936, the term 'fascism' carried as much an emotional impact as intellectual.\(^11\) One aspect of anti-fascism was clear: for self-designated progressives, anti-fascism was the side of Good.\(^12\) The International Brigade, made up of so many different nationalities, was not united by race, language or nation. If they were united at all, it was only by class and politics.\(^13\)

The foreigners who volunteered to support Franco knew very little about Spanish politics; they had come instead to fight an international war that was closely bound to the personal and political contexts of the their own home nations.\(^14\) As the official record of foreign volunteers that fought for General Franco's Nationalists was partially obscured by their victory, it is difficult to obtain an accurate figure of how many foreigners served. Excluding those Italian and German 'volunteers' who in fact fought under the orders of Mussolini and Hitler, by August 1938 there were around 1,248 foreigners from 37 different countries.\(^15\) Of these, there were around 700 Irish, some French, Russians and Romanians. Franco's volunteers were largely united through their conservative, pro-Catholic, and anti-

\(^{7}\) Ibid., pp. 12-13.
\(^{8}\) Ibid.
\(^{9}\) Jackson, 'The Army of Strangers,' p. 108.
\(^{10}\) Ibid.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 107.
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., pp. 108-9.
\(^{15}\) Ibid, p. 8.
communist ideologies. Many of these groups felt that a Nationalist victory in Spain would help in furthering their domestic national struggles. The French 'Joan of Arc' company that supported Franco was drawn from extreme Right groups in France. While they contained broad political differences within their group, they shared the belief that the struggle in Spain was part of their own struggle against the French Popular Front, and more broadly, the fight against international Communism. Similarly, the White Russians that volunteered for Franco saw themselves in an international struggle against Communism, and hoped that a victory in Spain would assist their cause in Russia by regrouping and galvanising the scattered White Army. The Romanian Iron Guard fought for Franco because they believed they were on an international crusade to defend the Church against 'Satan and his Judeo-Masonic henchmen'. Their rhetoric echoed Franco's about supporting traditional forces against the evil powers of 'Communism, Freemasonry and World Jewry'. The Romanians also saw the Civil War as synonymous with their own crusades in Romania, and believed that victory in Spain would assist their domestic struggle. In all these cases, Franco's volunteers understood the War in international terms. They fought to oppose Communism, protect the Catholic Church, and to further these causes in their home countries.

The British government's stance on the Spanish Civil War and British citizens' divided opinions provide examples of the way the war was internationally constructed, and go some way towards explaining the motivations of the volunteers. British society was divided on issues of the war according to their class loyalties: the upper classes depicted the war as a crusade for the warriors of fascism, and the lower classes depicted the war as a Republican defence of liberty. The government, seemingly, was in favour of neither, though still contributed to splitting the argument into a simple binary. 'We English hate Fascism,' stated the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1936, 'but we loathe Bolshevism as much. So, if there is somewhere where Fascists and Bolsheviks can kill each other off, so much the better.' This was the British government's public justification for non-intervention in Spain.

16 Ibid., p. 127.  
17 Ibid., p. 173.  
18 Ibid., p. 189.  
19 Ibid., p. 216.  
20 Ibid., p. 239.  
21 Ibid., p. 239.  
The Spanish government addressed the League of Nations in 1936, appealing for assistance and refuting such a simple binary interpretation:

> In the eyes of many, the conflict in Spain is simply a particularly acute and bloody manifestation of two rival political doctrines: Communism and Fascism. I shall not insult you by assuming that it is necessary for me to refute here this puerile and over-simplified conception of the situation.  

This statement from the Spanish government did not change the binary analysis of the war. Indeed, even many of the volunteers that fought for the Republic did so through Communist channels, and Russia was the only foreign country to play a major role in assisting the Spanish government. In this sense, it can be argued that even when the Spanish government received international assistance, it was because the war was perceived internationally through a Communist/Fascist binary.

The overarching ideologies and powerful symbols that were part of the Spanish Civil War provide another reason why foreigners volunteered. People who did not care about Spain nevertheless had an opinion about their Civil War, and some still do.  

An International Brigadier put it this way:

> The Spanish Civil War seemed to provide the chance for a single individual to take a positive and effective stand on an issue which appeared to be absolutely clear. Either you were opposed to the growth of fascism and went to fight against it, or you acquiesced in its crime and were guilty of permitting its growth.

The Civil War offered a reductive, clear and dualistic representation of complex political ideologies to its international participants. Alongside the opportunity to take positive and significant action, this was a key incentive for their participation. Jackson explains the attitudes of many of those who wanted to fight fascism through the notion of a 'single-struggle thesis'; that is, protesting in New York, assembling in London or shooting

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26 Ibid.
Nationalists in Spain were all part of the same single struggle against fascism.\textsuperscript{27} Sam Wild, a leader of the British Battalion in 1938 that fought for the Republic, stated that for him it was 

\ldots elemental. Here was fascism spreading all over the world, the rape of Abyssinia, the rise of fascism in Germany and the persecution of the Jews there, and the rise of the Blackshirts in Britain with their anti-Semitism, and especially their anti-Irishism. I felt that somebody had to do something to try and stop it.

Wild made no ideological distinctions between German, British or Italian fascisms; they were perceived simply as a united and single evil that need to be opposed.\textsuperscript{28} This dualist interpretation of a single struggle equally applied to the motivations espoused by the opposing Nationalist volunteers, who saw themselves as fighting in a united front against godless Communists. They perceived the War through their own national historical experiences, and dichotomised their interpretations through terms like good versus evil, Catholics versus Freemasons, Christians versus Jews, or anti-Communists versus Communists\textsuperscript{29}

In many letters written by Americans that fought in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade for the Republic, the soldiers attempt to explain their reasons for volunteering to friends and loved ones. The explanations again reflect the international and personal reasons offered by most foreign volunteers, and reinforce the dichotomised interpretations of the war as one all-encompassing ideology versus another. There are dangers in relying too heavily upon such letters, as the presence of a military censor would have made the volunteers less likely to criticise their purpose, or to express unhappiness with their situation. They may also downplay danger or overstate their reasons to make their case seem more plausible. Nevertheless, the letters provide some intriguing insights into the reasoning of the soldiers, and further support the hypothesis that they were motivated by an international and ideological understanding of the Civil War combined with domestic national and personal reasons.

In answer to the question, 'Why go to Spain?' one American volunteer explained that 'the victory of the system of oppression known as fascism would make my life

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 108.
\textsuperscript{28} Baxell, 'Myths of the International Brigades,' p. 18.
\textsuperscript{29} Keene, \textit{Fighting for Franco}, p. 292.
meaningless’. This political ideology is reflected by Hyman Katz, who extrapolates his view to the international and national contexts, writing that:

... seeing all these things – how fascism is grasping power in many countries (including the U.S., where there are many Nazi organisations and Nazi agents and spies) – can’t you see that fascism is our own problem – that it may come to us as it came to other countries? And don’t you realise that we Jews will be the first to suffer if fascism comes?

Katz is concerned about fascism on an international level, and sees the fight in binary terms of for or against fascism. Another soldier, John Cookson, also uses an ‘us or them’ representation of the War, writing that ‘to defeat fascism would ensure a final victory for the forces of progressive and advanced humanity’. Canute Frankston, yet another American volunteer, wrote that he had gone to Spain to join with

... a great progressive force, on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of saving human civilisation from the planned destruction of a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power. Because if we crush fascism here, we'll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world from the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's fascist heels.

As with the previous two soldiers, Frankston depicts the war as a worldwide struggle between two opposing forces that are mutually exclusive, good or evil. Again, the concept of fighting internationally to further a domestic cause in their home country is expressed by the soldiers as they justify their involvement in Spain.

The American James Lardner wrote a point-form list that clearly illustrates the very broad international motives for war that many soldiers held, while again also explaining some very individual and personal reasons for fighting. He rated the list as ‘fairly accurate,

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31 Ibid., p. 32.
32 Ibid., p. 39.
33 Ibid., pp. 33-4.
as I did it for my own information'.  

Lardner wrote that for him, 'The first four reasons and the ninth, especially the first, are the most important ones in my opinion.' To explain why he went, Lardner wrote:

− Because I believe that fascism is wrong and must be exterminated, and that liberal democracy or more probably Communism is right.
− Because my joining the I.B. might have an effect on the amendment of the neutrality of the United States.
− Because after the war is over I shall be a more effective anti-fascist.
− Because in my ambitious quest for knowledge in all fields, I cannot afford in this age to overlook war.

The first two reasons were internationally construed and prioritised by Lardner, but there were also personal goals that urged his action. Indeed, as the list continues, Lardner adds further personal reasons like wanting something 'remarkable' in his personal background, wanting to 'impress various people', getting in 'good physical condition', and wanting to show 'a girl in Paris' that she can exist without him (this is the ninth reason, one of Lardner's self-rated most important reasons for risking his life fighting in a foreign country). On the basis of these letters, these American volunteers clearly perceived the Spanish Civil War as international in nature, a fight between two mutually exclusive opposing political ideologies, but also a struggle that was worth joining for domestic and personal reasons as well.

European and American intellectuals and writers were another group that dichotomised the war through international understandings. The issue that united many of the literary intelligentsia was anti-fascism. Those that commented on the issue saw fascism as an oppressive doctrine that was against aesthetic expression and freedom of speech, with the potential to silence meaningful art and literature forever. Fascism, therefore, needed to be opposed by the forces for progress and democracy. This ideological standoff was depicted as a zero sum game, with the only conceivable resolution requiring

34 Ibid., p. 45.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Nelson and Hendricks, Madrid 1937, p. 45.
39 Fountain, J. 'The Notion of Crusade,' p. 135.
the total submission of one or the other side. This is exemplified by the question asked of British and American writers and intellectuals, requiring them to express their allegiance for either the Republicans or Nationalists, and insisting that it was not possible to abstain from taking a side. To some extent, the energetic response from Europe and America's intellectual communities to the Spanish Civil War was a reaction against their governments' non-interventionist stances. The English writer George Orwell wrote that he had gone to Spain with 'the notion of writing newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do'. Orwell too was guilty of favouring dualism and stereotype over depth at times when describing the War. 'Here we are,' he wrote, 'soldiers of a revolutionary army, defending Democracy against Fascism, fighting a war which is about something...'[Orwell's emphasis]. Orwell also noted that his participation in the War was vital for clarifying his own personal political orientation, and as such it was also a kind of individual crusade for him. Here again we find the combination of an international, ideologically dualistic interpretation of the Spanish Civil War mixed with personal or domestic concerns providing motivation for a foreigner to volunteer.

Foreign volunteers from all over the world travelled to Spain to risk their lives fighting for and against broad ideological categories like Communism, Fascism, the Church and Democracy. They were motivated by international interpretations of the War, combined with their own national and personal goals. The international rhetoric that effectively dichotomised understandings of the Spanish Civil War was a very powerful discourse; it motivated people from dozens of countries all around the world to fight for either the Republicans or Nationalists, under the impression that victory or defeat would impact the world, their own countries and themselves as individuals. For most international

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40 'It is clear to many of us throughout the whole world that now, as certainly never before, we are determined or compelled, to take sides. The equivocal attitude, the Ivory Tower, the paradoxical, the ironic detachment, will no longer do... This is the question we are asking you: Are you for, or against, the legal government and the People of Republican Spain? Are you for, or against, Franco and Fascism? For it is impossible any longer to take no side' taken from K. Foster, “Between the Bullet and the Lie”: Intellectuals and the War' in Kenwood, The Spanish Civil War, p. 19.

41 Ibid., p. 21.
44 Orwell, Orwell in Spain, p. 32.
45 Fountain, 'The Notion of Crusade,' p. 136.
volunteers, the legislative programs of both the Nationalist and Republican sides were mere footnotes compared to the motivation represented by the grandiose crusade that many of the volunteers were signing up to fight for.

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